

All Caught Up

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All Caught Up

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Summary

"Betrothed," Wei Ying says indignantly.

Lan Wangji can't stop his gaze from darting up to him. Wei Ying understands. Wei Ying is looking at him, wide-eyed and upset on his behalf.

"And you don't even *like* her," Wei Ying says.

"I don't even know her," Lan Wangji says quietly.

"But even if you *did*—" Wei Ying starts.

"I wouldn't want this," Lan Wangji finishes.

Notes

The fic is completely written - the second half is in final beta and will be up soon!

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See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

Chapter 1

"She seemed...nice," Wei Ying says.

She had not. She had seemed haughty. She was clearly intelligent, which almost made it harder. Lan Wangji could dismiss someone who was dim-witted. The first daughter of the Fan clan was both smart and cold.

He had been extremely uncomfortable throughout their entire encounter. He had only survived it due to the presence of his brother, who had been required to be there as a chaperone, and Wei Ying, who had not supposed to have been there at all. Only, in all the months Wei Ying has been living at Cloud Recesses, he has largely come along to meetings Lan Wangji has been part of. He does not, technically, have a role, but he is interested in the dealings of Lan Wangji's duties as Chief Cultivator and, quite often, he has a different take on matters than anyone else, which has ended up helping Lan Wangji more often than not.

Suffice it to say, it's become common to see Wei Ying at meetings where he does not have an official role, other than that of Lan Wangji's friend. Lan Wangji does not allow his attendance to be questioned. Which is how Wei Ying had ended up attending the meeting between Lan Wangji and Fan Nuying, the Fan Clan's first daughter, to whom Lan Wangji was certain his uncle intended him to be betrothed.

He was more than certain, actually, even though it hadn't been stated outright. The set-up, the circumstances: it had all been all clear.

"Did she?" Lan Wangji says steadily.

Wei Ying's head jerks up and Lan Wangji hears what he said, suddenly, and recognizes the rudeness in his question. He tries to reframe it. He cannot. He looks at Wei Ying.

"Oh," Wei Ying says. He has a look on his face, a tilt to his mouth, like he's going to tease. Lan Wangji is not certain he could take teasing right now. Perhaps Wei Ying sees it in his face, because he blinks and his expression changes abruptly. "Yeah, okay. I didn't like her either."

Lan Wangji feels relieved. It's not just him. He shouldn't be surprised, but it helps, since Wei Ying is not in the position Lan Wangji almost certainly is. His uncle had set up the meeting. The young woman had come with her family. Xichen had looked apologetic, nearly wincing each time his gaze landed upon Lan Wangji. Lan Wangji is not stupid. He knows how these things work. He knows how his uncle thinks. He knows what to expect from the meeting that is scheduled for tomorrow morning.

"The only reason it has not been said right out," he murmurs now, "is because it's so clear." He thinks he's talking to himself but he's also waiting to hear what Wei Ying says next.

There's a long pause before Wei Ying says—almost wincing, reminiscent of Xichen's face all afternoon—"You know what's coming tomorrow morning." He sounds almost grim. Not

pitying, for which Lan Wangji is grateful. While he feels quite sorry for himself, he cannot take pity at the moment.

He gives Wei Ying a short nod.

"Did Zewu-jun warn you?" Wei Ying demands. "He had to have known, right?"

"I should have known," Lan Wangji says softly. "I should have seen this coming."

"Why?" Wei Ying sounds outraged, which gives Lan Wangji a soft feeling in his stomach. He's unreasonably glad that Wei Ying is feeling all of the same feelings that Lan Wangji is pushing down in himself. "Why would you see this coming? Who would see this coming? Why would they make you—"

"Because I am the second of the Twin Jades of Gusu Lan." Lan Wangji had planned to say it stoically. Instead, it comes out bitter. "Because I am Hanguang-jun. Because I am Chief Cultivator. Because the first of the Twin Jades—" He cuts himself off before he says something he will regret.

Wei Ying *actually* winces this time, which is good. Lan Wangji is glad, somewhere in the less petty part of his soul, that Wei Ying cares enough about Xichen to wince at the unfair reaction Lan Wangji is having to the fact that Xichen is definitely no longer marriageable—at least not in any way that would benefit the clan.

Which leaves Lan Wangji. And Fan Nuying. To whom, tomorrow morning, he will be expected to silently, stoically, dutifully agree to be betrothed.

"Betrothed," Wei Ying says indignantly.

Lan Wangji can't stop his gaze from darting up to him. Wei Ying understands. Wei Ying is looking at him, wide-eyed and upset on his behalf.

"And you don't even *like* her," Wei Ying says.

"I don't even know her," Lan Wangji says quietly.

"But even if you *did*—" Wei Ying starts.

"I wouldn't want this," Lan Wangji finishes.

They sit, quietly fuming together for a few moments. It feels petty, and pointless, and strangely good.

"What if," Wei Ying says, and stops.

Lan Wangji's heart lurches in his chest as he stares at Wei Ying. Lan Wangji can't see a way out of this, but Wei Ying—Wei Ying is a problem solver. Lan Wangji watches him, and waits.

Wei Ying's eyes narrow as he looks at Lan Wangji. "What *if*," he says again. His eyes lose focus and he's gazing right through Lan Wangji, not seeing him, as he thinks. Lan Wangji

feels like he can see his brain working at the problem. He knows, in his heart of hearts, that there is no solution here, and that having hope right now is foolish. He knows this.

"Lan Zhan," Wei Ying says firmly, blinking his eyes back into focus and looking into Lan Wangji's eyes. "You know that everyone thinks you and I are—" He cuts himself off abruptly, but his meaning is clear.

Lan Wangji nods. He is aware that the cultivation world believes that his friendship with Wei Ying is unseemly. That most believe it is more than friendship. Lan Wangji himself believes it is more than friendship—not in the coarse way of the rumors that make their way to even his ears, but he does care more about Wei Ying than he does about anyone else.

He does *not* care about the coarse rumors.

Wei Ying is studying him carefully. "And you know," he says, "that those who don't believe that we're—" He waves his hand back and forth between them, and clears his throat. "That if they don't think that, they think that I'm dragging you into my...dirty cultivation techniques or whatever." He chews on his lip for a moment. "Or both," he says then. "I bet most people think...both."

Lan Wangji has not wasted time pondering that, but he is aware of it. He does not care about either of these rumors.

"And yet they still utilize your talismans," he says. "They tout the wonders of your inventions even as they are scandalized by you."

Wei Ying grins, quick and bright. "And yet you," he says, "are still marriageable, despite your uncouth association with the wicked Yiling Laozu." He raises one eyebrow. "One might discern a bit of a double standard there."

"One might," Lan Wangji agrees. He feels breathless with an unnamed anticipation. The flush in Wei Ying's cheeks means he's solved the problem. Lan Wangji waits.

"Lan Zhan," Wei Ying says, reaching out and taking both of Lan Wangji's hands in his own. "Will you marry me?"

"Everyone thinks we're...together, anyway," Wei Ying argues, leaning forward into Xichen's space, his whole body radiating with the conviction of his beliefs. "Everyone thinks I've pulled him into my wicked tricks. Everyone thinks they know what we're doing and that it's ten times worse because we're doing it in *the* most appalling way, because we're not even married." He gazes up at Xichen. "So why not make it legitimate?"

Xichen looks at Wei Ying with his mouth slightly open for a moment before turning pained eyes on Lan Wangji. "Brother," he says.

"Is he wrong?" Lan Wangji asks quietly.

Xichen opens his mouth, and closes it again. His gaze darts to Wei Ying and back to Lan Wangji. "You are still Chief Cultivator," he says helplessly. "You are still Hanguang-jun. You are still—"

"I am aware of my titles," Lan Wangji interrupts. "I am aware of my lineage."

"Uncle would like to see you married," Xichen says. Says it right out, the thing they've been talking around since the Fan contingent first arrived.

"Uncle will have his wish." Lan Wangji says it simply and reaches out his hand. Wei Ying slips his own hand into it immediately, clasping it tightly.

"Oh," Xichen says quietly. "Oh, no."

"Oh, *yes*." Wei Ying's expression is determined.

"Wangji, you don't have to do this." Xichen is staring down at their clasped hands. "I'll—we can figure something out. I—Uncle will—"

"I know I do not have to," Lan Wangji breaks in. "I want to. It was not until the Fan clan arrived that I realized Uncle's plans." This much is true. "I believed that there was an understanding about Wei Ying." He pauses. "About Wei Ying and myself." That much, he realizes, is also true. Wei Ying regularly spends the night in the Jingshi. He comes to meetings with Lan Wangji, even though he has no part in them. He resides in Cloud Recesses even though he has no official role. No one questions it—not to Lan Wangji's face.

"Wangji," Xichen says it again, a pleading tone in his voice.

"I have no wish to bring shame to the family." Lan Wangji keeps his tone carefully neutral. "I realize, now, that relying upon the idea of an understanding results only in confusion, at best."

"We want to make it official," Wei Ying says cheerfully. "On the up and up. All according to the rules." He tilts his head, shooting a look at Lan Wangji. "We'll need a chaperone," he adds. "I can't take the risk of besmirching your good name. Not if we're going to be courting."

"Which we are," Lan Wangji says, giving Wei Ying's hand a quick squeeze before looking at his brother.

"Courting," Xichen says faintly.

"Courting." Lan Wangji puts conviction in his voice.

"When do we tell your uncle?" Wei Ying asks. "We should probably do it before the meeting with the Fan family, huh?"

Xichen closes his eyes for longer than a blink. "Right," he says. "That is...correct."

As is only appropriate, Xichen is the one who has to say the actual words to their uncle. Lan Wangji feels bad about that but, as Wei Ying had said, in order to have this be above board, they have to abide by the rules. It would not have been proper for Wei Ying to have gone directly to Lan Wangji. It would, perhaps, have been more proper for Wei Ying to have gone directly to Lan Qiren, but it was not outside the bounds of propriety for him to have gone to the eldest brother first.

"Particularly given the circumstances around the visit from the Fan clan," Xichen says smoothly, as though it were a given. As though he could convince their uncle everything about this was fine, if only he could maintain the proper tone. "When it became clear what the intention was." Xichen hesitates the slightest amount. "You were focused upon hosting the Fan clan," he continues. "And it is a great concern to mitigate the situation before the...potential arrangement can proceed any further."

His uncle's face is stormy, Lan Wangji observes. Lan Qiren's face is red and his lips are thin and his teeth are clenched so tightly that it looks like his jaw may break. Lan Wangji is relieved that Xichen had managed to get their uncle to agree to clear the room for this conversation—he's fairly certain it's about to devolve.

"I thought it best," Xichen says firmly. "When we discussed it, I encouraged Brother to speak with clarity regarding his concerns."

Per Lan Clan rule number three hundred and forty six, Lan Wangji thinks, trying very hard not to be smug about it. He tilts his head minutely, catches Wei Ying's eye. The set of Wei Ying's mouth means he is also aware of rule number three hundred and forty six.

"Of course, upon convincing him to express to me his intentions, I immediately brought this to your attention." Xichen's voice and demeanor are still smooth, his posture immaculate, his face turned calmly up to face their uncle, as though he expects Uncle to accept this situation in a calm and rational manner.

It takes quite some time for the yelling to subside. They are presented with a tirade the likes of which Lan Wangji has seen a few too many times. He ponders, during the extent of it, whether Xichen having cleared the room for this conversation was, in fact, a positive thing. He'd initially taken into consideration the emotional response their uncle was going to have and had been relieved that it would occur in private.

Now, nearly seven minutes into his uncle's angry speech, he wonders if they would have been able to mitigate this reaction if there were members of the public, or of his uncle's staff, present.

It's a moot point, he decides after a while. They have only to get through it.

When Lan Wangji risks a glance out of the corner of his eye, Wei Ying does not look upset, despite the words that are coming out of Uncle's mouth. He looks vaguely distracted—much like Lan Wangji feels.

Uncle clocks their exchanged glance immediately. He takes a breath, clearly ramping up for another tirade, when Xichen smoothly interrupts. "It is nearly time for the meeting with the

Fan clan," he says in an extremely calm, yet not patronizing, tone. "It would be best for us to explain the change in circumstances to them immediately when they arrive."

Uncle's face flickers through a range of emotions, all of them angry. "Very well," he grits out, much to Lan Wangji's surprise.

Telling the Fan family goes surprisingly better than expected. Fan Nuying, standing demurely behind her father, looking rather bored as she gazes at the floor, looks up in surprise when Lan Wangji's uncle stiffly indicates that his nephew is here with his betrothed. Lan Qiren's mouth twists on the word and something about that makes Lan Wangji's heart soar. Uncle uses the introduction as a method to avoid acknowledging that the Fan family was here specifically to claim Lan Wangji for their daughter. He made it sound as though Lan Wangji being betrothed was a known fact.

("It's a good idea," Wei Ying had said, "but it doesn't actually make any sense." He'd looked up at Lan Wangji. "What do I have to offer the venerable Lan Clan? What possible negotiations could be made to make this remotely feasible? I come with nothing attached." He had waved his hand around. "No familial connections, nothing that is going to make your uncle want to strike this bargain.")

"And yet," Lan Wangji had responded quietly, "let us try."

Wei Ying had looked at him for a handful of seconds. "Let's try.")

The only way for the Fan family to save face is for them to behave as though they, too, had known that Lan Wangji was already being courted and their visit to Cloud Recesses was for another reason. Any other reason.

"Ah," is all Fan Nuying's father says.

Fan Nuying is looking at Lan Wangji and then her gaze skates over to Wei Ying. Her expression is assessing. She rakes her eyes over Wei Ying like she's taking inventory. When her gaze turns back to Lan Wangji, he meets her eyes steadily and, after a moment, raises one eyebrow an incremental amount.

The look she gives him is forthright and then she lets her gaze skate down his body as well, in a way she had not when they had met yesterday at what both of them understood was a meeting to establish their future marriage. She had seemed completely disinterested in the intimacy of the situation and had only paid attention when her father had turned the topic to the holdings of the Lan Clan.

Now, she's ignoring the counsel going on between her father and Lan Wangji's uncle, but she raises one eyebrow back at Lan Wangji in a way that would be shockingly brazen had it lasted for more than the split second it does. Then her face falls back into its bored lines from the previous day and she directs her gaze back down at the floor.

Lan Wangji feels his ears getting hot as he stands there, keeping his gaze straight ahead, focusing on the middle distance. She's not even looking at him anymore, but that brief

assessment made him feel like she was picturing—that she was looking at him and Wei Ying and thinking about them—that she—

Wei Ying nudges him with one elbow, and Lan Wangji jerks his gaze over to him. From the corner of his eye, he sees Fan Nuying raise her eyes briefly and, when she looks back down, there's a smile tugging at the corners of her mouth.

His ears get hotter.

Wei Ying is making urgent eyes at him. Lan Wangji drags his attention back to the proceedings.

"Of course," his uncle is saying with gritted smoothness, "we have not officially announced the betrothal, as the negotiations around it have not yet been concluded."

Wei Ying makes a small noise in his throat.

"And we are aware that, should the agreement not come to fruition, it only stands to reason that the Second of the Twin Jades of Gusu Lan would be, as he is now, a powerful connection for any clan to have." Uncle looks smug as he says it, some of the anger receding as he makes it clear that the door is not closed on Lan Wangji's potential match. He does not turn his eyes to glare at Lan Wangji, but Lan Wangji knows his uncle well enough to know that he's doing it in his heart.

Lan Wangji does not turn his eyes towards Wei Ying. He knows the proper behavior here and he will not stray from it. He keeps his face solemn and his eyes unfocused. He thinks, with all of his heart, that even after all this time, his uncle has no idea what he's up against when it comes to Wei Ying.

"Lan Zhan," Wei Ying says glumly that evening. They're no longer allowed to be alone together in the Jingshi, now that they're betrothed. Despite his uncle's assurance to the Fan contingent that they are not officially courting, he seemed to take great pleasure in confirming that they will need a chaperone from now on. "Until the official nuptials," he'd said.

Lan Wangji had never heard the word "nuptials" said with quite so much bitterness.

They are in the general dining pavilion, which is empty, as the dinner hour has long since passed. Lan Wangji had hoped that Xichen would be assigned chaperone, but he had been pulled immediately into a meeting with their uncle upon conclusion of the meeting with the Fan clan, so Wei Ying and Lan Wangji are being watched over by Mingsheng, a lower-level disciple. He is fairly young and takes his duty seriously, sitting stiffly within hearing distance, keeping his eyes on them, but also looking vaguely terrified every time his glance lands on Wei Ying.

Lan Wangji looks at Wei Ying curiously, trying to see what his uncle's disciple sees.

Wei Ying has not deigned to sit at the table, insisting he needed instead to slump on the floor itself, leaning back against the wall, a jar of Emperor's Smile resting in his lap. Lan Wangji had brought the jar in and glanced stonily at Mingsheng, daring him to say something.

Mingsheng has apparently decided that his chaperone duties do not extend to enforcing this particular rule of the Lan Sect, and says not a word as Wei Ying opens the jar and takes a long pull.

Lan Wangji doesn't have the energy to tell Wei Ying to get off the floor, let alone sit up straight. From Lan Wangji's vantage point, sitting neatly at the table next to him and drinking a cup of tea, Wei Ying's position looks almost comforting, the sprawl a physical representation of the emotional upheaval the day has brought.

"Lan Zhan," Wei Ying says again.

"I am listening," Lan Wangji says.

"Lan Zhan, what are we going to do?" Wei Ying sighs and takes another drink from the jar. "This is the problem with my plans, you know. I have good plans. Solid plans. I just don't always think things through to their conclusion."

Lan Wangji knows this about Wei Ying. He also knows that Wei Ying is very, very good at pivoting when his plans go awry. "Continue with our plan," he says carefully, aware of Mingsheng's listening ears. "And see where it takes us."

Wei Ying sighs again. "If we had let your uncle have his way, you'd have been engaged to that girl by now." He takes another drink. "And the way she was looking at you—you saw that, right?"

"I saw," Lan Wangji says, pitching his voice low, "how she was looking at *us*."

"Yeah," Wei Ying says slowly. "I clocked that, too."

Lan Wangji watches him and, even in the soft light of the dining hall, he can see the blush rise on Wei Ying's cheeks.

Mingsheng clears his throat but when they both look over at him, he's got his gaze focused blankly on some spot high on the wall over Lan Wangji's head. Lan Wangji suddenly remembers him from earlier—he'd been in the room for the meeting with the Fan clan as well.

Fan Nuying's look had not been subtle.

"She came with a dowry," Wei Ying says, his voice gloomy. "I bet her father was going to offer your uncle a whole lot more than—" He gestures up and down at himself, and sighs. "Fuck."

Lan Wangji always knew that this pretense of courting was a delaying technique, at best. He hadn't seen the visit by the Fan contingent coming; he hadn't had time to *think*. "We have

some time," he says. Not much, but some. "The Fan clan is staying to negotiate a trade agreement with Uncle." To save face, perhaps.

Wei Ying slumps even lower on the floor, taking another messy sip of liquor. "To wait it out," he says flatly. "Your uncle will find a way to deny the betrothal."

"Possibly," Lan Wangji says. "But we knew that he would try. We just need a little bit of time."

"They want to wait it out?" Wei Ying says, sitting up straighter. "We can wait longer." He takes another long pull. "Besides," he says, wiping his mouth with his sleeve. "That girl is worth a lot of money, like we said." He sounds hopeful this time. "Why would they wait around? She'll get claimed by someone else in no time."

Lan Wangji tries not to let the hope rise in his heart. "Perhaps," he says.

"And besides," Wei Ying says then, clearly warming to his topic, "you've been sullied by the Yiling Laozu."

Mingsheng's eyes shoot over to them immediately, like he'd somehow find them engaged in coitus here in the main dining hall without his having noticed.

Lan Wangji doesn't even bother giving him a glance. He keeps his eyes on Wei Ying, who is beaming up at him. "Who'd even *want* you, after that?"

Lan Wangji just keeps looking at Wei Ying, trying again to tamp down hope. "It does seem unlikely," he says, "that there would be many. Particularly those who would be able to make an acceptable offer to Uncle."

"Right!" Wei Ying beams up at him. "I have the best ideas." He reaches up to take Lan Wangji's hands in his own, clasping them tightly.

Lan Wangji does believe that about Wei Ying, in general. He allows himself a flutter of hope that it may hold true here.

From the corner of his eye, he notes Mingsheng leaning forward, mouth open, his eyes intent on where their hands are clasped.

The disciple is staring at Wei Ying—Wei Ying, who is crouched in front of Lan Wangji, black robes spread around him on the floor, the red ribbon from his topknot trailing forward over his shoulder. He's spilled liquor down his neck and it glistens in the lamplight. He's giving Lan Wangji that particular smile he has, sure and certain and with more than just a hint of wickedness.

Lan Wangji allows his thumb to rub slowly over the side of Wei Ying's hand and does not deign to glance at Mingsheng. "You do," he says softly, gazing into Wei Ying's eyes.

Wei Ying beams at him. "Just you wait," he says, like a promise.

Lan Wangji allows his eyes to soften and hears a soft huff of scandalized breath from Mingsheng. But when Lan Wangji tilts his head to look at him, Mingsheng is staring off into the corner and resolutely pretending he's seen nothing.

Lan Wangji doesn't allow himself to linger in bed, unwilling to face the day, but he can't deny that he wishes he could. He rises at his usual time and goes through his morning ritual of meditation, sword practice, bathing, but through it all, he's unfocused. His eyes feel gritty, his brain slow. He'd fallen into his usual immediate sleep but had woken up somewhere in the dark of night and couldn't find a peaceful sleep again.

It had been strange to go to sleep by himself. Wei Ying spends the night with him often enough that Lan Wangji has grown used to drifting off to sleep to the sound of Wei Ying's rustles at his writing desk—doing research, creating talismans, reading through whatever latest treatise has captured his interest.

He hadn't quite realized it had become such a common background noise that the silence had been the thing that had woken him. Lying there in the darkness, he'd realized that in particular after nights like this—when they had worked together on something, when they had spent the evening with their heads together, working something out, deep in the sort of free-wheeling and sometimes heated debate that Lan Wangji has learned to enjoy as they figured out one thing or another together—those were most often the nights when it would creep up to Lan Wangji's bedtime before he realized it. Sometimes he *did* realize it but let it go past by minutes, or occasionally hours, so pleasing was that level of collaboration with Wei Ying.

Now, he sits at his table as his tea brews and contemplates what the day might bring. It's rare that he is quite so thoroughly unable to anticipate it.

He keeps expecting Wei Ying to burst through his doors—even on those nights that he does not end up sleeping in the Jingshi, he quite often shows up in the morning, disheveled and still half-asleep, with crease marks on his face from his sheets, already halfway into an explanation of something he and Lan Wangji had discussed the previous day.

But—no. Now, they have created a situation where that is not allowed. They can't be alone together, not while they are betrothed.

"Lan Zhan," he hears from outside, a loud cry breaking the quiet of the morning. "Lan Zhan," he hears again, and of course it's Wei Ying—who else would break the rules quite so vociferously? Even the junior disciples generally have more discipline than that.

Lan Wangji rises and heads swiftly to the door, sliding it open. Wei Ying is outside, skittering to a halt with a clatter, the loose stones of the path scattering around him. His hair is a rumpled mess, topknot half falling out, and he's blowing strands of hair out of his face as he tries to catch his breath.

"Wei Ying," Lan Wangji says, taking a swift step backwards. "We can't—" If they are seen alone together, under any circumstances—

"I know," Wei Ying pants out. He reaches out and drags Mingsheng into view, from where he had been standing off to the side, clearly trying to catch his breath after Wei Ying had taken him on a forced run through Cloud Recesses. Mingsheng is trying to look as though he has not just broken any rule whatsoever, at the same time that he's taking in panting breaths and sweat is rolling down his reddened face.

Lan Wangji blinks at him, then refocuses on Wei Ying, who is bracing himself on his knees, still trying to catch his breath. "What is it?" he asks.

"Jiang Cheng," Wei Ying wheezes, "is here."

Lan Wangji feels himself blanch.

"Jiang Cheng is here," Wei Ying pants again, "and is meeting with your uncle." He gulps in air. "Lan Zhan, we have to do something!"

"Yes," he agrees. He looks at Wei Ying's hair, which is down around his shoulders in crazed tangles, and at his robes, which are barely fastened. His inner one seems to be on inside-out, in fact. "Once you are prepared."

"I'm prepared," Wei Ying says, making a face and starting to try to scoop his hair up into his topknot. "I'm prepared for Jiang Cheng to possibly destroy my life. Our life. Our lives," he corrects himself. His hair is lumpy and only barely held in place.

Lan Wangji reaches forward, intending to turn Wei Ying around so he can fix his hair.

Mingsheng clears his throat.

Lan Wangji lets his hands drop. It is remarkably strange to not be able to touch Wei Ying.

Wei Ying slants a glare at Mingsheng. "It's fine, I've got it," he says, blowing out his breath as he struggles once again with his hair, this time finally achieving a smoother topknot.

Lan Wangji indicates the neck of his own robes and Wei Ying glances down at himself, spots the inside-out inner red robes. "Oh, for fu—"

Lan Wangji and Mingsheng clear their throats at the same time.

"We have to go," Wei Ying says urgently. "They won't even notice. Come on, let's—"

Lan Wangji tilts his head at the Jingshi.

Wei Ying blows out his breath. "Fine. *Fine*." He keeps muttering under his breath as he storms inside, already wrenching open his outer robes.

Lan Wangji and Mingsheng wait in silence: Lan Wangji's peaceful, if slightly tinged by anxiety; Mingsheng's sleepy and slightly tinged by a silent reproof at Wei Ying's behavior.

"Okay," Wei Ying calls out, sliding the doors open with a bang. "Okay, let's go."

His robes are on correctly, everything in place, and his hair is smooth, his eyes a bit wild.

"We cannot simply interrupt their meeting," Lan Wangji points out. It would be an act of total impropriety, and they really do need every means they have to make their case at the moment.

"You're Chief Cultivator," Wei Ying says indignantly. "You can interrupt any meeting you want!"

"Under this particular circumstance," Lan Wangji says, "my status matters only as it pertains to the cultivators, not sect business."

Wei Ying chews on his lip for a moment. "Lan Xichen," he says finally. "Lan Xichen can interrupt your uncle. He'll be all about sect business."

Lan Wangji hesitates.

"Lan Zhan, every second my brother is in there alone with your uncle brings us closer to a war between the sects."

Wei Ying may be exaggerating, but not by much. "Let's get my brother," Lan Wangji agrees.

Xichen is a little bewildered when they arrive to drag him over to the pavilion where their uncle takes meetings, but comes along graciously.

"You've *met* my brother, right?" Wei Ying says breathlessly, as he strides along ahead of the rest of them on the path. "He'll ruin everything. We've got to—"

"It will be fine," Xichen says with confident assurance.

Lan Wangji eyes his brother and has his doubts.

Xichen speaks quietly to the disciple outside the pavilion and asks to be announced. The disciple slips inside and, after a moment, emerges to guide them in. He indicates they are to wait until his uncle calls on them. Wei Ying is practically vibrating in place as he stares across the room with wide eyes. He opens his mouth and Lan Wangji catches his eye, giving a firm shake of his head.

Wei Ying settles back on his heels, glowering but silent.

Jiang Wanyin sits across the low table from Uncle. His hands are clenched in tight fists on his knees and his jaw is jutting forward as he speaks in tight, intent tones. Uncle listens, with an expression on his face that nearly matches the belligerent one Jiang Wanyin is wearing.

It takes a moment for the words to filter through.

"I have offered an amount of property that, I'm sure you will concede, is more than generous when matched with the terms we have already come to an agreement on." Jiang Wanyin's words are appropriate, the barely-contained rage filtering through his tone slightly less so.

"Not to mention that an affiliation between the Jiang and the Lan clans would be beneficial to both parties."

Lan Wangji feels very foolish for not realizing the reason why Jiang Wanyin is here. For the last few wild minutes, he was certain it was to drag Wei Ying to Lotus Pier.

Instead, he is negotiating a dowry.

Lan Wangji can't help but look over at Wei Ying. Wei Ying has gone very, very pale. He's staring at his brother as the negotiations continue.

When the negotiations finally break, Jiang Wanyin pushes himself to his feet and gives Uncle an appropriate bow before spinning on his heel and heading directly over to his brother.

"What are you *doing* here, Jiang Cheng?" Wei Ying's voice comes out strangled.

"Getting screwed by Hanguang-jun's uncle," Jiang Wanyin responds, then glances at Lan Wangji. "Sorry," he says, but he doesn't sound very much so.

Lan Wangji gives him a stony look but there's not much heart in it—his brain is too busy whizzing around wondering why he hadn't considered this to be a possibility.

"You don't have to do this." Wei Ying still sounds nearly nothing like himself. He is wild-eyed and jittering anxiously. "Jiang Cheng, seriously, this isn't something you need to worry about."

Jiang Wanyin presses his lips together and the look he gives Wei Ying isn't so much of a glare as it is—

Lan Wangji isn't sure how to parse it. He certainly doesn't look happy, or calm, but neither does he look particularly angry. He's looking at Wei Ying steadily, and even though his hand is clenched tightly around his sword, his expression is almost soft.

Almost.

"I'm not *worried* about it," he says tightly. "I'm *working* on it."

"I don't need a dowry, Jiang Cheng, it's fine." Wei Ying blows out his breath in exasperation.

The look Jiang Wanyin gives him is nothing short of incredulous. "Yes, you fucking *do*," he says. "And I'm offering a substantial one, but Lan Qiren is being—" He looks at Lan Wangji and clearly bites back what he was going to say. "Anyway, I'm working on it, it's fine."

"I didn't mean for you to have to take care of this." Wei Ying's eyes are steady on his brother. "I can figure it out."

Jiang Wanyin rolls his eyes and pushes at Wei Ying's shoulder. "You're an idiot," he says. He glances over his shoulder, where Uncle is approaching the negotiation table once again.

"Now get out, I'm busy."

He squares his shoulders and heads back to the table. He looks determined and, if Lan Wangji is reading his face correctly, almost excited.

When Lan Wangji glances over at Wei Ying, his face as he watches his brother sit down neatly across from Uncle and lean forward to continue the negotiations is a portrait of bewildered resignation.

Lan Wangji nudges his shoulder gently.

"Right." Wei Ying comes to himself with a start. "Right, we should—go. Right?"

Lan Wangji nods and turns, Mingsheng falling into step as they head out.

"I sort of just thought that, I don't know," Wei Ying says, sighing heavily. "I guess I thought we'd just—" He glances over at Mingsheng. "I didn't think Jiang Cheng would get involved," he finishes dully.

Lan Wangji somehow hadn't, either. He knows it should have been something they considered, but they just...hadn't.

"We had to figure out something quickly." Wei Ying has his chin resting on his crossed hands on the table in front of him, lips pressed together in a pout. He still has that wild look around his eyes he gets when surprised by his brother's presence.

Lan Wangji nods. They had. And now—

"And now we've created a whole *thing*." Wei Ying doesn't lift his chin off of his hands as he speaks, his words coming out disheartened.

Mingsheng is sitting one table over, studiously not watching them.

Lan Wangji takes a breath. "Wei Ying," he says then, steadily. "Do you wish to retract your proposal?"

Both Wei Ying and Mingsheng lurch forward from their seated positions at Lan Wangji's words.

"Lan Zhan!" Wei Ying's voice is urgent, helpless. "No, that's not what I—no, of course not, I—" He's sitting up straight now, leaning forward, grabbing Lan Wangji's hands in his own.

Lan Wangji feels a small ping of relief in his chest but— "If this is too much," he says carefully. "If having your brother needing to negotiate this is—"

"It isn't." Wei Ying says it firmly, his hands tight over Lan Wangji's own. "I mean it. You know how Jiang Cheng gets to me. I was just—surprised." He laughs a little, his eyes crinkling at the corners, and it's such a familiar, comforting sight that the tension in Lan Wangji's chest eases further. "I sort of figured he'd given up on me," Wei Ying says lightly. "I honestly didn't even consider the question of a dowry."

"But without a dowry, there is no way that Grandmaster would ever consider—" Mingsheng cuts himself off as both Lan Wangji and Wei Ying look over to where he is leaning in and looking concerned. His face flushes and he presses his lips together and resumes staring into the middle distance.

Lan Wangji lets it sit for a beat before he turns back to Wei Ying.

"He's not wrong," Wei Ying says then, casting another look over at Mingsheng. "I just didn't think—"

"Neither of us considered it," Lan Wangji says.

"Nope." Wei Ying looks forlorn. "We were too caught up in—" He glances over at Mingsheng again. "—being so in love with each other," he finishes brightly. He's still holding onto Lan Wangji's hands and he tilts his head a little bit, running his thumb over the curve of Lan Wangji's thumb, letting it trail down to his wrist. It is the smallest of touches, meant to draw Mingsheng's attention, to illustrate the veracity of his words. It sends a hot thrum through Lan Wangji, his heart beating faster than it should.

"Mn," he says. They had been too caught up in it; in any plan that would avoid Lan Wangji having to marry Fan Nuying. He'd known in his heart that it was only a stopgap measure—that it was merely a way to avoid the most immediate issue and not a foolproof plan. He hadn't been looking for foolproof. He'd only been looking at Wei Ying.

"And now we have Jiang Cheng to deal with," Wei Ying sighs.

"Mn," Lan Wangji says again. "From what we overheard, he's offering a substantial dowry." He says it carefully, unsure how Wei Ying feels about that.

"I know," Wei Ying says glumly. "He doesn't have to do that. He shouldn't—this isn't—" He blows out a breath. "I swear I didn't think about this part," he says again, "but if I had, I would never have thought he would come." He looks up at Lan Wangji. "I would never have thought he'd offer...what he's offering."

Lan Wangji thinks, now, about Jiang Wanyin's eyes earlier, flashing with something like anger, as he'd said, "I'm not going to let *any* clan think that they can claim someone from *my* sect and take them on like they're some sort of *pauper*." He'd glared at Wei Ying like it was Wei Ying who had deliberately insulted him, instead of no one having offered any insult whatsoever. "You'll get an appropriate dowry and the Lan clan will be goddamn lucky to have you," Jiang Wanyin had spat out.

Wei Ying's expression had been a combination of astonished, annoyed, and softly vulnerable in the face of his brother's simmering rage. "Jiang Cheng," he'd said softly. "You don't—"

"I do," Jiang Wanyin had said shortly, and then punched Wei Ying hard in the shoulder. "I can't believe I had to find out from Nie Huaisang," he'd said. "Everyone assumed I knew. You made me look like a fucking idiot." He'd hit Wei Ying again.

Lan Wangji had decided he was going to make Jiang Wanyin regret it should he raise his fist once more, dowry or no dowry.

"I'm sorry," Wei Ying had said then, absentmindedly rubbing his shoulder and looking at his brother with warmth in his eyes. "I really am, Jiang Cheng. We didn't—we hadn't quite—" He'd glanced over at Lan Wangji, trying to figure out how to explain without actually *explaining*, but in the next moment, Jiang Wanyin had caught him in a rough hug, lasting moments only before he'd shoved Wei Ying away. "It took you both long enough," he'd said, turning away to wipe at his eyes. "I thought this would happen a long time ago."

"What," Wei Ying had said, staring.

"I sort of figured *you'd* never get there," Jiang Wanyin had said, "but I thought the venerable Hanguang-jun would have figured it out."

"Mn," Lan Wangji had said, for lack of any more pertinent response. Figured what out?

Now, in the dining hall, Lan Wangji feels the weight of both Wei Ying's and Mingsheng's gaze upon him. "The dowry your brother is offering," he says to Wei Ying, "is appropriate enough that Uncle will have a difficult time refusing it."

"Near impossible," Mingsheng breaks in.

They both turn to look at him.

"It's more than the Fan clan was going to offer," he says then, leaning in intently. "I don't see how Grandmaster could turn it down."

"He could," Wei Ying says flatly. "I'm still the Yiling Laozu."

"Yes, but—" Mingsheng is cut off as the door to the dining hall bursts open and Sizhui enters in a flurry, clearly having been pushed from behind. "Find *out*," they all hear Jingyi hiss from behind him.

Sizhui casts an agonized look behind himself, then straightens and walks sedately towards them. He bows before Lan Wangji, saying softly, "Hanguang-jun."

"Sizhui." Lan Wangji eyes him.

"Wei-qianbei," Sizhui says, turning to bow to Wei Ying instead of meeting Lan Wangji's eyes.

"What is it, Sizhui?" Wei Ying is the one who asks it, sounding weary and resigned. "Just. Fine. You have a question? Ask."

"No, no, it's nothing," Sizhui says hurriedly, taking a careful step back. His eyes are darting between the two of them, however, and his hands are clasped in front of him tightly enough that his knuckles are white.

"Okay," Wei Ying says. "Then you can—"

"Only," Sizhui breaks in, then presses his lips together, looking shocked at himself for interrupting. "My apologies. I didn't mean to—that is, I should not have—" He takes in a breath through his nose, lets it out slowly. "I'll just..." He starts to bow again, clearly meaning to take his leave.

"Sizhui," Lan Wangji says.

"Right," Sizhui says after a moment, straightening back up. "We—I heard that you were betrothed." He says it quickly, like if he didn't get all the words out at once, he never would. "To each other." He looks first at Lan Wangji, then at Wei Ying. "Are you? To each other?"

Wei Ying lets the question sit there for a beat before he says, "We are. Mostly."

"Mostly?" Sizhui asks. There's a rattle at the door behind him, a shadow like someone's trying to peek through.

"Sect Leader Jiang arrived this morning," Lan Wangji says smoothly, "to negotiate the dowry."

"Oh." The way Sizhui says it is imbued with apprehension. "Oh, that will be—interesting."

Wei Ying moans a little, and slumps back down in his seat, rubbing his hands over his eyes.

Sizhui is staring at Lan Wangji, his expression open, clearly curious. "But you really are? Betrothed, I mean, to each other? Mostly?"

"Yes," Lan Wangji responds.

"Who asked who?" comes from the crack between the doors, a stage whisper that echoes across the room. "Find out who asked who!"

Sizhui presses his lips together tightly, looking pained. Lan Wangji gives him a look that contains the principles of rules eight, twenty three, and seven hundred and ninety two. Sizhui knows better than to gossip.

"I asked him," Wei Ying says glumly. "I asked him, because I wanted him to be happy, and him being happy makes *me* happy, and it seemed like a fundamentally good idea. Only now Jiang Cheng is in negotiations with Lan Qiren, which *cannot* end well, and Mingsheng here is our permanent third wheel, and we are at the center of Junior Gossip Central and honestly, we should have just eloped." He looks at Lan Wangji. "We should have just *eloped*, Lan Zhan. Why didn't we think of that?"

Lan Wangji shakes his head. "Uncle would not have recognized that."

"Right." Wei Ying slumps back glumly. "Right."

"Details," they hear Jingyi hissing from the doorway. "Get *details* or—"

"Hanguang-jun," Sizhui says loudly, and bows to the exact degree of appropriateness, his face pained. "Wei-qianbei. Apologies for disturbing you."

He makes a swift exit, his steps hurried, and he eases the door open only just enough to slide through before closing it quickly behind him.

"You didn't even find out any details," Jingyi's dismayed stage-whisper comes ringing through into the dining room. "Did he ask Grandmaster first? Did Grandmaster know it was coming? Did Wei-qianbei cry when he asked Hanguang-jun? I bet he cried. They've been in love since forever. Does this mean that they *weren't* doing it all along?" His voice recedes somewhat, Sizhui clearly leading him away, the clatter of stones under their boots echoing as he does so. "Or that they *were* and they just want to make it legitimate now?"

The last thing they hear is Sizhui's pained voice saying, "Jingyi, please stop talking."

Mingsheng assumes his usual look of gazing into the middle distance, but his ears are very, very red and there is a set to his mouth that makes it clear that he has Jingyi's questions ringing in his ears, as does Lan Wangji.

Lan Wangji looks at Wei Ying. Wei Ying has his face pressed against the table. "We knew that was what people thought," Lan Wangji points out softly.

"They are *children*, Lan Zhan," Wei Ying says, words muffled against the lacquered wood of the table. "They are children and they are thinking about us—" He cuts himself off, lifting his head to gaze at Lan Wangji in despair. He has a red mark on his forehead from where it was pressed against the table. His hair is a mess.

Lan Wangji suddenly, inexplicably, wants to laugh. He doesn't, but he can't stop the corners of his mouth from turning up just a little.

Wei Ying's mouth drops open. "You think this is *funny*?" he says, sounding indignant. "You, of all people—the staid and respectable Hanguang-jun—you think having your good name besmirched by *gossiping children* is *funny*?"

It takes nearly every ounce of Lan Wangji's not-inconsiderable control to keep his reaction to one raised eyebrow as he repeats, "Besmirched."

"Besmirched, Lan Zhan," Wei Ying says. "I said it! You are! You heard them! That's what everyone—" He cuts himself off. "It actually *is* a very good thing that I asked you to marry me, Jiang Cheng or no Jiang Cheng." His indignation is rising to a fiery peak. "If for no other reason than to make an honest man out of you. Not that you weren't! But *they* apparently don't know that."

Lan Wangji reflects that it is, in fact, *extremely* unfortunate that in the moment, he can only seem to process how genuinely amusing this entire scenario is, from beginning to end. He looks fondly at Wei Ying, whose entire body is trembling with indignation. "It is," he agrees. "It is a very good thing."

"Okay." Wei Ying stands up, wrenching his robes into order as he does so, and reaching up to straighten his topknot. "Okay, well, we agree on that. Let's go."

"Where?" Lan Wangji inquires, rising smoothly to his feet.

"To watch the end of the negotiations," Wei Ying says. "I want to make sure Jiang Cheng doesn't get screwed on this." He glances up at Lan Wangji. "Sorry, but—you know what I mean."

Lan Wangji does.

Lan Wangji thinks he will fall asleep immediately. It has been a long day filled with complexity and his brain is whirring inside his skull. He knows meditation will help calm his turbulent thoughts, but he doesn't have the fortitude for even that when he arrives back at the Jingshi. He goes through the least amount of steps possible to prepare for bed. When he douses the lamps and is left in shadowed darkness, it feels like sinking into a deep, warm pool of water.

He settles himself into bed in the deep blue darkness, breathing in and out slowly, trying to trace over the events of the day and then let them go. He keeps getting caught on the edges of them: Wei Ying's face this morning as he had arrived, disheveled and panicked; the unlikely image of his uncle and Wei Ying's brother caught up in heated negotiations across the table from each other; Fan Nuying's face as she swept her eyes over both Wei Ying and himself, appraising and obvious. He feels himself flushing in the darkness as he considers what she had been thinking that had resulted in the arch look she had given him. He'd expected, perhaps, her reaction to be anger over a lost potential union between their clans, or disgust over the idea of him and the Yiling Laozu doing...whatever it was she had been thinking about.

Instead, her look had been one of interest—the first look of interest in him he had seen since he'd met her.

He opens his eyes, staring up at the ceiling and trying again to calm the whirring in his brain. He slows his breathing, measuring it out in moments. He relaxes his shoulders consciously; he unclenches his hands from the fists into which he has unconsciously clenched them. He has just closed his eyes again when there is a rustling sound from off to one side, by the window. When his eyes snap open, it's to see a paperman easing in, fluttering down on the small breeze that follows it.

Lan Wangji is too tired to push himself up to sitting. He watches the paperman flutter its way along the floor. It manages to catch a soft breeze and float its way onto Lan Wangji's bed, landing right by his head on the pillow. He turns onto his side to face it. The faceless, animated paperman shuffles forward, exuding an air of pleasure at finding Lan Wangji awake. He feels it. He knows it. This is Wei Ying, insofar as it is a piece of paper imbued with his energy. His spirit, strong enough to come through clearly even with limited movements, no facial expressions, nothing but the irrepressible energy that he'd know anywhere.

Besides, who else would be so bold?

The paperman freezes and then drifts, lifeless, slipping down Lan Wangji's pillow. There's a creak at the entrance to the Jingshi a moment later and he hears the near-silent shift of the

doors. They slide open for a moment only, the slightest amount, and then Wei Ying is inside, sidling up to his bed and sliding down to the floor beside it, smelling of the crisp air of the autumn night.

"I wanted to be sure you were still awake," Wei Ying says, grinning at him as he curls up, resting his chin on one knee.

"And alone," Lan Wangji points out mildly.

"Right," Wei Ying agrees. "It wouldn't be proper for you to be receiving an unchaperoned visit from your betrothed."

"My virtue," Lan Wangji says, "is at stake."

Wei Ying's grin flashes bright in the darkness. "What have we done, Lan Zhan?" He rests one elbow on the bed, leaning his head against his arm and looking up Lan Wangji.

Lan Wangji curls further forward on his side, still too weary to raise his head. He feels less at sea, however, with Wei Ying here. Together, they can figure this out. "At least," he says, "I'm not betrothed to Fan Nuying."

"We did accomplish that much." Wei Ying settles down further, blinking slowly at Lan Wangji in the dimness. "But now there's a dowry."

"And a chaperone." Lan Wangji thinks about Wei Ying's sleeping pallet that had been ostentatiously removed yesterday.

"Mingsheng," Wei Ying says glumly. "That's a problem."

It is. His presence hinders their ability to discuss. To plan. To figure out the way forward. They've always worked best when it is just the two of them together. "It's odd to have someone present. All the time."

"It is." Wei Ying shifts a little bit on the floor next to him. It's too dark to really see his eyes, even though he's resting his head on the bed not that far from Lan Wangji. Lan Wangji is tired enough for all of this to have a hint of the surreal, to imagine that it's taking place one step outside reality. "Lan Zhan." Wei Ying's tone is one of confession. "I got used to being alone with you." He sighs a little, and Lan Wangji can feel it as his weight settles against the side of the bed. "And now..."

"And now," Lan Wangji says in soft agreement. Sleep feels much closer than before. It's been an exhausting day, and it's much past his normal bedtime. His eyes feel like sandpaper, still, but his brain feels somewhat calmed by the warmth of Wei Ying curled up beside the bed. "Aren't you cold?" he asks. "You should—" He's not sure what it is he thinks Wei Ying should do.

"I'm okay." Wei Ying shivers a little and when Lan Wangji reaches out to him, he lets his hand creep into Lan Wangji's. "I'm good, now." He sighs, resting his head against the bed.

"He's going to sign the letter tomorrow," he says. "Jiang Cheng is. Confirming the dowry." He laughs softly. "I have a *dowry*, Lan Zhan."

"You never needed one," Lan Wangji says, feeling sleepy and soft.

"For this to really work, I did." Wei Ying sighs. "I should have thought of that." He's quiet, then, and Lan Wangji watches him chew on his lip for a few moments. "I should have thought of a lot of things. I just wanted—"

Wei Ying stops again, and Lan Wangji frowns into the darkness. "I'm sorry," he says. "You didn't have to do this. I didn't mean for you to—"

"You didn't make me do anything." Wei Ying's voice is soft, and fierce, in the darkness. "We had to figure it out. We're *going* to figure it out."

Again—like in the moment when Wei Ying had proposed and Lan Wangji had accepted—Lan Wangji believes him. He believes him with all of his heart. They will. They have, perhaps, not anticipated everything they should have, but already Wei Ying has a dowry, and the Fan Nuying family is scheduled to leave tomorrow mid-morning. Surely these are both positive results.

"I should go," Wei Ying says quietly. "If anyone finds me here, at this point, I literally will have destroyed your virtue, you know."

"According to Lan Jingyi," Lan Wangji says, "that ship has sailed."

Wei Ying breaks into giggles, trying and failing to smother them against the bed. Lan Wangji finds his own mouth tilting up in a smile as he watches him. He does not wish to be married. He wants only this—to have his days and his nights as his own, to spend his time as he sees fit. He's so tired and now, the darkness growing deeper through his windows, Wei Ying by his side, he feels his body relaxing, his eyelids growing ever heavier.

"Ah, Lan Zhan, it is so far past your bedtime." Wei Ying's hand is soft in his, and he squeezes his fingers gently. "I should let you sleep. I'll slip out of here—carefully," he adds, drawing a fresh paperman out of his robes. "I'll be sure no one sees."

Lan Wangji's eyes keep closing for longer than a blink, no matter how he tries to keep them open. "Wei Ying," he says.

Wei Ying looks at him in the dim light, his hand still warm against his own. He waits.

Lan Wangji has nothing to follow it up with. Instead, he lets his fingers squeeze Wei Ying's in return. Wei Ying's smile flashes again, sudden and brilliant. "We'll figure it out," he says. "I've got you."

Wei Ying, Lan Wangji thinks, as sleep draws him closer, has got him. He falls asleep with the rustle of paper in his ears, the soft slide of the doors the last thing he's aware of before he's drawn down fully into sleep.

The dowry is decided, and agreed upon.

An auspicious date is decided, and agreed upon.

The location is Cloud Recesses, after much heated debate between Jiang Wanyin and Lan Wangji's uncle. Jiang Wanyin finally allows it, after much discussion, but secretly, Wei Ying tells Lan Wangji, he thinks Jiang Wanyin feels as though he won that battle, seeing as how he doesn't have to foot the bill for the guests.

"Still," Lan Wangji says, as they take yet another interminable, sedate walk through the winding paths, working to keep Mingsheng at a reasonable distance so that Lan Wangji and Wei Ying may speak in peace. "We must—" He hesitates. The date of the wedding is some few months away, the closest they could schedule it without intimating some sort of scandalous reason behind it. "It's close," he finishes, finally.

"It is." Wei Ying's tone is careless, unconcerned, as Lan Wangji had anticipated.

He still has a plan. Lan Wangji's heart quickens as he realizes it. This need not all end in the devastation Lan Wangji has been picturing.

"Mn," Lan Wangji says, in breathless anticipation.

"So," Wei Ying says, turning to him and, with a quick glance behind them, drawing him off of the path and back into the trees with him. "Listen, I have an idea."

There is a rustle of leaves on the path some way away from them, and Wei Ying unhesitatingly reaches his hand up behind Lan Wangji's head and draws his mouth down to his own. Wei Ying's lips are soft, and warm, and Lan Wangji melts against him before he can think better of it. Wei Ying makes a sound against his mouth that Lan Wangji feels throughout his entire body and without willing it, Lan Wangji backs Wei Ying up against a tree. He's got him pressed there, their mouths together in what is still, by any rational definition, a fairly chaste kiss.

Lan Wangji feels it throughout his entire body.

"Ah." Wei Ying gasps against his lips. "Hang on, just—"

Lan Wangji is lost in the tension of Wei Ying's body against his own, in how soft and warm his lips are, in the decadence, the *freedom* of what they're doing. He—

There is the loud sound of Mingsheng clearing his throat behind them. "I shall take a turn around this copse of trees," he announces as they break apart from each other. "It should take several minutes." He walks off, his boots rustling in the fallen leaves.

Lan Wangji looks after him, then over at Wei Ying, who is still right next to him, his hand clutching at Lan Wangji's sleeve where he'd wrapped it as they'd kissed. "Right," he says, faintly, looking up at Lan Wangji. Then he snaps to attention. "Right," he says more firmly. "That's what I thought might happen. Okay, so, here, we have at least a few minutes to talk."

Talk. Lan Wangji blinks at him. Right. "There should be no physical intimacy," he says, "before the marriage vows." He knows this rule, as he knows all of the other rules.

"Ah, Lan Zhan," Wei Ying looks at him, his eyes twinkling a little in the rich autumn light filtering through the trees. "Everyone breaks that rule a little bit. That's why Mingsheng is giving us some privacy. Some premarital kissing is a *good* thing."

It is. It was. Lan Wangji had not anticipated kissing being part of this. But since it has bought them some privacy, he can see that bending the rule might be beneficial. "I understand."

"Okay, so." Wei Ying leans in close. "The goal here was to avoid you being married off to the Fan clan, right? We accomplished that. Kind of. Largely. I sort of figured we could just let everyone know we were courting and ride it out until they left—that girl is going to find another suitor in no time—and then your uncle would be irritated, sure, but we could, like, have some sort of public fight and then break off the engagement, right? With the idea that hopefully by then your uncle will just be so relieved that you're no longer planning to marry the Yiling Laozu that he'll give up on the idea of marrying you off entirely."

He's made the speech all in one breath, looking intently at Lan Wangji. Lan Wangji tilts his head. "I'm not certain—" he starts.

"I know, I know." Wei Ying waves one hand in the air. "It's not *foolproof*, and I definitely forgot about the dowry, and sort of really didn't think your uncle would set a *date* so quickly, but for right now, what we've got to do is convince them it's real. The more real it looks, the more convincing it will be when we break it off."

"With a public fight," Lan Wangji says. He keeps his face neutral, but Wei Ying sees his misgivings nonetheless.

"I know, I know, but listen, it's me," Wei Ying says. "I'd irritate anyone into dumping me sooner or later. We can play it off. It'll be fine."

Lan Wangji looks at Wei Ying. He strongly disagrees with his assessment on every point. He ponders for a moment the idea of renouncing Wei Ying, even temporarily. He can't picture it. "Wei Ying," he starts, just as there is a loud tread of Mingsheng completing his circuit and returning to them.

"Lan Zhan," Wei Ying breathes, surging close and resting one hand on his cheek. He gazes up at Lan Wangji, his eyes warm and intense. "It will all be okay." He pushes up on his toes a little, swaying towards him just as Mingsheng comes into view. He stays there for a moment before moving back, his gaze dropping as he pivots away from Mingsheng, as though shy at being caught.

Lan Wangji's cheek still feels warm from where Wei Ying's hand had been. He takes a breath and lets his own gaze fall on Mingsheng. He keeps his chin up, leveling him with a stare.

"I—" Mingsheng coughs into his sleeve. "Shall we continue our walk?" He's the one, now, who sets out at a faster pace, leading them back to the path, keeping himself several paces ahead of them.

Wei Ying and Lan Wangji follow behind. Lan Wangji allows himself to tip his head close to Wei Ying, as he's seen other lovers do while courting. Wei Ying's mouth quirks up in a smile and he walks close enough to Lan Wangji that his robes brush against him as they walk. "We've got this," he says reassuringly. "Trust me."

"Family dinner," Wei Ying says thoughtfully. "What tack to take?"

"You've been to family dinners before," Sizhui points out.

"I have, yes," Wei Ying replies. "And Lan Qiren didn't like me then; he certainly isn't going to like me better now."

They're in Wei Ying's quarters—doors flung open for propriety, Sizhui serving as chaperone, Mingsheng taking a well-deserved break. It strikes Lan Wangji, as he enters, that he's never spent time in Wei Ying's quarters, not once during all the months that Wei Ying has resided at Cloud Recesses. He's been aware of them, of course: Wei Ying does not spend every night with him in the Jingshi, but he does so regularly enough that Lan Wangji rarely thinks about him having his own space.

Wei Ying's quarters are relatively small, made all the more so by his things flung everywhere. Sizhui has clearly spent time here—it's made obvious by the careful way he makes his way across the room, in how he shifts the books spilling across the windowsill, stacking them in a neat pile and creating a place to sit.

"Hanguang-jun?" he says, gesturing to the sill, offering Lan Wangji the spot.

Lan Wangji shakes his head, leaning back against the doorway and crossing his arms neatly across his chest as he watches Wei Ying get ready.

"Do I stick with the regular look?" Wei Ying says, doing a turn in front of Sizhui, who has settled onto the windowsill. "Or do I go fancy? Add another layer? Or, huh, take some layers *away*, to spice things up?"

Jiang Wanyin had just departed that afternoon, with a final word to Wei Ying about propriety and not doing anything to fuck up the betrothal (Jiang Wanyin's words) before the wedding ceremony.

"It's kind of sweet, when you think about it," Wei Ying had said to Lan Wangji, watching Jiang Wanyin leave. "He's worried about your virtue."

Lan Wangji had not responded. He was fairly certain that was not precisely Jiang Wanyin's concern.

Sizhui shakes his head. "Better not," he says.

"Right, right," Wei Ying says. "I should probably try to keep it civil." He glances in the mirror on the wall, catching Lan Wangji's eye in the reflection and quirkling one eyebrow up. "Lan Zhan, lend me a robe? A bit of light blue to offset the dark Yiling Laozu wardrobe?"

"Behave," Lan Wangji says peaceably, refusing to get drawn in to Wei Ying's antics. He studies Wei Ying's robes, which are a simple black on black pattern, but woven through with a hint of deep blue embroidery, tracing over the curves and spirals of the design. "This is appropriate."

"Appropriate." Wei Ying swings around and leans back against the counter underneath the mirror, scattered with his hair ties, combs, red ribbons trailing off it. He crosses his arms over his chest, mirroring Lan Wangji's stance. "Did you hear that, Sizhui? *Appropriate*. Me."

"Do you not want to be, Wei-qianbei?" Sizhui asks curiously.

"Sizhui! You wound me!" Wei Ying clutches his chest. "It's as though he doesn't even *know* me, Lan Zhan." He crosses over to the doorway so he can drape himself over Lan Wangji's shoulder.

Lan Wangji does not shake him off.

"But." Sizhui is looking up at them both. "Don't you want to be, just for now? So that Grandmaster will be more sure about accepting you?"

Wei Ying snorts. "Lan Qiren is never going to be sure about accepting me," he says.

"But you wish to marry Hanguang-jun," Sizhui persists.

Wei Ying pauses, still leaning against Lan Wangji in the doorway. "I do," he says, after the briefest of moments.

Sizhui, ever sensitive, catches the moment. A line appears between his eyebrows. He opens his mouth and then closes it, sitting up straighter on the sill.

He's clearly too well-mannered to ask the questions he wants to ask.

"I do." Wei Ying says it more firmly this time, letting his head rest on Lan Wangji's shoulder with a sigh. "It's complicated, Sizhui. Lan Qiren agreed to the dowry." Wei Ying gets a pained look on his face whenever the word "dowry" comes up. "And he agreed to the date, but something tells me he's really hoping something will happen between now and then to shut this thing down."

"That's terrible." Sizhui frowns, the line between his eyebrows getting deeper. "He knows you love each other. Everyone knows. He shouldn't stand in the way of that."

Wei Ying tilts his head to look up at Lan Wangji with a startled grin on his face. "Everyone knows, eh, Lan Zhan?" he says.

Lan Wangji does not respond. Sizhui is not in the business of gossip. He is friends with Jingyi, but he doesn't lend credence to even half of Jingyi's stories. And Sizhui is to be trusted. If everyone thinks—

"I'm glad," Sizhui says stolidly. Lan Wangji does wonder if his assertion of "everyone" can be taken at face value. "I'm glad you're—" He cuts himself off. "I'm just glad."

Lan Wangji looks at Wei Ying, whose head is still leaning on Lan Wangi's shoulder. Wei Ying's eyebrow goes up and he gives a small shrug before pushing up on his toes and pressing a small kiss to Lan Wangji's cheek. It's so unexpected that Lan Wangji gives a start and pulls back.

"It's okay," Wei Ying says, his mouth still very close to Lan Wangji's. His eyes are dancing. "It is, in fact, only appropriate."

Lan Wangji studies his face for a handful of seconds. He feels himself flushing, his ears going hot as he struggles to regain his equilibrium. "Shameless," he murmurs, finally, for the pleasure of seeing Wei Ying grin.

"Always," Wei Ying responds.

When Lan Wangji turns back to Sizhui, he's watching them with evident interest, though he turns his face away immediately to look out the window, his cheeks scarlet, a happy smile on his face.

The family meal goes about as well as could be expected. "Inappropriate," Uncle huffs when he sees Wei Ying in his most ostentatious robes, scarlet ribbon trailing over his shoulder.

"*Thank* you," Wei Ying says in response, shooting a pleased look at Lan Wangji.

Lan Wangji doesn't respond. There is nothing at all inappropriate about Wei Ying's robes. Uncle would have found something wrong with anything Wei Ying did. The robes were just the thing he focused on first.

Uncle's face turns the color of Wei Ying's ribbon.

Xichen does his best to keep the peace, exuding an aura of calm over the table, making pointed eye contact with their uncle over the teapot.

Wei Ying struggles with silence at the meal—even after all this time, he tries and fails to make it through all the courses without saying a word. "This soup," he murmurs to Lan Wangji under his breath.

It's all he says, but it's enough to make Lan Wangji's mouth quiver into a small smile. The soup is bland even by Lan Wangji's standards, a sad broth with a few small wontons bobbing in it.

Uncle watches their exchange with a thunderous look in his eyes, only the rule of silence keeping him from saying a word.

His uncle, Lan Wangji thinks, follows the rule of silence to the letter, if not the intent. His simmering rage is a background noise throughout the meal.

It doesn't get better with the tea afterwards—although, perhaps it does. Perhaps it's preferable to have some things being said than everything tamped down.

Wei Ying is—however he'd be sad for Lan Wangji to point it out—appropriate throughout. Polite and attentive, still expressing his opinions in the face of Uncle's sour comments, but doing so in a way that could not possibly be misconstrued as rude.

Lan Wangji cannot say as much for his uncle.

After several courses dealing with his uncle's huffs, his glares, and his outright condescension towards the mildest words spoken by Wei Ying, Lan Wangji has had enough.

He has, in fact, had more than enough.

"The latest night hunt," Xichen tries, "turned up an unexpected result."

"What sort?" Wei Ying says with interest. "Was it the one down in the southern region? I heard there were all these drownings and I thought it might turn out to be a ghou, though such things could also be caused by a shui gui."

Uncle snorts.

Lan Wangji, Xichen, and Wei Ying all ignore him.

"It was, in fact, a ghou." Xichen studies Wei Ying with interest. "How did you know? That's not a ghou's usual behavior."

Wei Ying leans forward—there's nearly nothing he likes better than talking ghou— and says, "It was the fact that no one seemed to have been getting possessed afterwards that caught my attention—"

"Likely," Uncle interrupts, which is shocking enough to get the attention of them, "drawn by your wretched demonic cultivation."

Xichen stares at their uncle, then closes his eyes for longer than a blink.

Lan Wangji is experiencing a dark rumble of pure rage. His uncle has said far worse things about Wei Ying, it's true. But now—

"Wei Ying," Lan Wangji says, surprised that his voice comes out measured, "is my betrothed."

"Much to our great misfortune," his uncle mutters, just enough under his breath that Lan Wangji could pretend he hadn't heard, should he choose to.

"I beg your pardon?" he says instead. He reaches for the tea pot, noticing with a sort of removed interest that his hands do not shake as he does so, despite the turmoil of rage he's experiencing. He's been angry with his uncle before, just perhaps with not this much fervor. It's an interesting feeling. He pours tea first for Wei Ying, and then himself, after his brother shakes his head as he proffers the tea pot.

"Your betrothed," his uncle says and oh, the words are not remotely polite, "cultivates in an untoward manner."

It's Wei Ying who snorts this time—a small sound, nearly not there. When Lan Wangji raises his eyes towards him, he expects to see a rage matching his own. Instead, Wei Ying looks genuinely bemused.

Wei Ying can be bemused. He's allowed to be bemused, the same way Lan Wangji is allowed to be furious. "And yet," he says softly, his voice sedate, controlled. His fury obvious to anyone who knows him. "And yet he is still my betrothed." He looks at his uncle. "Per your agreement with the Jiang Clan." He raises his teacup, taking a measured sip, watching his uncle over the rim.

His uncle is visibly simmering with rage, as well. In some well deep within Lan Wangji, he thinks that seems like a problem for Uncle to deal with, and none of Lan Wangji's concern. He sets down his teacup and rises, holding out one hand to Wei Ying. "Beloved?" he says.

Wei Ying looks up at him, startled, his own teacup halfway to his mouth. His eyes crinkle at the corners and he sets the cup down with a slight clatter, and slides his hand into Lan Wangji's, allowing himself to be gently pulled to his feet.

"Brother?" Lan Wangji says then, tilting his head at Xichen. "Would you serve as chaperone, as I escort my betrothed to his quarters?"

"I—yes." Xichen hesitates, looking at their uncle before rising. "Of course."

"Of course." Uncle says it through gritted teeth. He really does look quite infuriated. It's an odd thing for Lan Wangji to realize that he doesn't care.

"Thank you for dinner, Uncle." Lan Wangji releases Wei Ying's hand and bows low. Deliberate. Appropriate.

Wei Ying and Xichen do so as well, a beat behind him.

Lan Wangji reaches out his hand again when it's done, taking Wei Ying's firmly. He pivots on one heel and draws Wei Ying out the door, ignoring his uncle, who is quivering with rage, still seated at the head of the table.

Xichen keeps pace with them on the way to Wei Ying's quarters. It's early yet. Dark has fallen during the interminable dinner, but it's early enough that, were they not betrothed, there would be no doubt Wei Ying would follow him back to the Jingshi. There is no doubt that Lan Wangji would have produced a jug of Emperor's Smile for him. There is no doubt that Wei Ying would have sat with him on the steps, sprawled back outrageously, and somehow, in almost no time, eased the tension Lan Wangji is carrying throughout his entire body. It would not have been methodical. It would not have been practiced. It would just have been Wei Ying, being Wei Ying.

Lan Wangji stops on the doorstep to Wei Ying's quarters. His shoulders are so tense they hurt. He tries for a brief second to remember what it feels like to have that tension eased after only a little while alone with Wei Ying. It feels like a very long time since he's had that.

"Sorry," Wei Ying says. He looks over Lan Wangji's shoulder at Xichen, as well. "Sorry," he says again. "That could have gone better."

Lan Wangji presses his lips together for a moment. "It wasn't you," he says. It comes out cold and furious. It's funny—he doesn't *feel* furious, not really. It's all—tamped down. But it comes out in his voice. He's usually able to control it better than that.

"It was a little bit me," Wei Ying says with a grin. "Isn't it always?"

Wei Ying is the master of his tone. He sounds like he genuinely thinks it's amusing. But there's a tightness around his eyes that makes Lan Wangji's fury against his uncle burn even more brightly.

"He should not have spoken like that," Lan Wangji says.

"No," Xichen supplies. "I apologize, Wei-gongzi. I truly believed he had come to terms with the situation."

"Did you?" Wei Ying asks. His tone is teasing. He looks tired. His red ribbon hangs limply over his shoulder. Lan Wangji wants—

"Wei Ying," he says softly, "is not a situation to be resolved."

Wei Ying looks up at him, startled.

"He's not something Uncle—or anyone—should merely come to terms with."

"Of course," Xichen says after a momentary pause. "Of course, Brother. I much agree. I will speak with Uncle. After all, he has signed the letter. And we have set the date."

Lan Wangji is too tired to continue this conversation with any modicum of appropriate behavior.

"Wei Ying," he says quietly. "I'm sorry you had to endure that."

"It's fine, Lan Zhan." Wei Ying seems quietly astonished. "I've been through many worse meals than that, and those were with my own family." He gives Lan Wangji the wide smile that means he's telling the truth and making it sound like a joke.

Lan Wangji moves forward, takes Wei Ying's hands in his own, and presses a kiss against the corner of his mouth. "And yet," he says softly. "I am still sorry."

When he moves back, both Wei Ying and Xichen are staring at him. He doesn't linger. He pivots and starts back to the Jingshi at an appropriate pace. He keeps his eyes on the middle distance. He keeps one hand curled gently at the small of his back. He's fine.

He sits in the stony quiet of the Jingshi. He leaves the lanterns unlit. He arranges himself on his meditation mat and settles his thoughts. He stays there for a full hour, darkness filling the corners around him, working to calm his mind, body, and spirit.

At the end of the hour, he opens his eyes. He stands and stretches. He contemplates the dim space around him.

He leaves.

Lan Wangji is careful on his way over. He knows how to make glances slide off him. It's a cautious balance to keep in a place full of cultivators, but in the short term, it works.

It's a technique he's learned from Wei Ying.

He has no time to consider before he knocks on the front door. He won't take the chance of hesitating, of being seen. When Wei Ying slides the door open, Lan Wangji steps in without waiting for an invitation.

"Lan Zhan," is all he has the time to say, as Lan Wangji slides the doors shut behind him.

Lan Wangji advances on Wei Ying. "What," Wei Ying manages, stumbling backwards over a pair of boots left sprawled across the floor. "What are we—"

Lan Wangji presses him back against the wall. He has his hands on Wei Ying's hips. He doesn't think he's ever touched Wei Ying's hips before. He gives himself that moment to feel them, to feel Wei Ying's breath coming rapidly against his face, Wei Ying's eyes wide and startled, to remember how warm and soft his skin had been when Lan Wangji had kissed the side of his mouth just an hour before. Only an hour? He feels as though he's been remembering the softness for much longer than that.

Then he kisses him. The same spot at first. He's been yearning for it, he thinks. Wei Ying makes a soft sound as he does it. Then Lan Wangji kisses the soft bow of his lips. It's chaste—as chaste as their kiss in the forest the other day, but it's still more intense, because Lan Wangji can pay attention this time. He was too surprised in the forest to process exactly how it had felt. He's been wondering if he's remembering it correctly.

He both has, and hasn't. Wei Ying's lips are as soft as he remembers, but the way they get softer under his own is either something new, or something he had missed the previous time. He is certain, though, there had been no hitch in Wei Ying's breathing as they had kissed—chastely, so chastely—in the forest.

It was appropriate, Wei Ying had said. That sort of kissing. It was allowed.

Lan Wangji deepens the kiss.

This is—more. Worlds more than the soft, chaste kiss. Wei Ying breathes in sharply through his nose and Lan Wangji tightens his hands on his hips. He opens his mouth a little, tilts his head, and oh, they slot together like they have been made for this.

It's what everyone thinks they do anyway. Why should he be blamed for something he's not even doing?

It's intense. He's trembling. Wei Ying is making small, soft sounds that cut right through Lan Wangji. It's nothing like he'd thought it would be—it's beyond anything his limited imagination could have shown him.

"We can't," Wei Ying whispers against his lips, even as he's got his hand tracing over Lan Wangji's side, long fingers looping around to press against the small of his back, the touch making Lan Wangji groan softly. "This isn't—we can't, you being here, this isn't something they'll overlook, they'll—"

"I'm Hanguang-jun," Lan Wangji says. His voice comes out so rough as to be almost unrecognizable. "I'm above reproach. I was, before this. I am now. No one would believe," he pauses and, feeling bold, presses his mouth against Wei Ying's neck, just below his jawline, where he can see his pulse jumping, just to feel it against his tongue. "No one would believe I'd risk my virtue." He tightens his hands on Wei Ying's hips, and Wei Ying's pulse beats harder against his lips. "Or the integrity of my clan," he says then, pulling back, his eyes still on Wei Ying's neck. He wants to bite Wei Ying there, he realizes—wants to suck at the skin there, wants to hear what noise Wei Ying would make if he were to do so. He wants to do it hard enough that he'll leave a mark. And so he doesn't allow himself that.

Instead, he kisses Wei Ying again. Harder, this time. He presses him against the wall. He finds himself slipping his tongue into Wei Ying's mouth and it is exhilarating. He feels it throughout his entire body when Wei Ying's tongue touches his own, and Wei Ying shudders against him, tilting his head and deepening the kiss.

"Oh," Wei Ying is saying between kisses. "Oh, *oh*."

Lan Wangji isn't sure how long they kiss for. Long enough that he's breathless and dizzy by the time he lifts his head. Long enough that it takes him more than a moment to gather himself enough to release his hold on Wei Ying. He pulls away and takes a step back, and then another, judiciously.

Wei Ying is slumped against the wall. He looks disheveled. He looks *debauched*. Lan Wangji likes it, possibly more than he should.

He takes another judicious step back.

"What was that?" Wei Ying sounds breathless, confused. "Were—did someone follow you here? Was that for—this isn't the way to go, Lan Zhan. I know a public fight isn't your favorite thing, but if we do it my way, you get out of this with your honor intact."

Lan Wangji looks at Wei Ying. His room is lit by lamplight, and it catches his eyes as he looks at Lan Wangji. "No one followed me here," he says.

"Oh. Oh, well, *good*." Wei Ying reaches up and straightens his topknot, pushing loose hairs out of his face, shaking his robes back into place. "I thought—okay, good." He looks at Lan Wangji, seems on the verge of asking another question.

"I should go." Lan Wangji turns for the door.

"You should," Wei Ying says, then sighs.

Lan Wangji looks back over his shoulder.

"It's weird, isn't it?" Wei Ying says suddenly. "Not hanging out together? I miss it. I miss you."

Lan Wangji is still processing the feel of Wei Ying's lips against his, trying to remember this time exactly how soft they were, to catalogue the moment of his tongue in Wei Ying's mouth. "I miss you too," he says, and leaves.

Lan Wangji is thinking about pinning Wei Ying down. He's thinking about getting him somewhere where he can do so—he's not so bold as to imagine a bed, but perhaps they'd be left alone in a field somewhere, or perhaps in the dining hall after everyone has gone to bed and no one remembered they have been left alone there, unchaperoned...

"The Zhang clan can't possibly be seated next to the Jins. We can't have bloodshed at a Lan wedding." Nie Huaisang peers over his fan at the seating chart laid out on the table in front of Lan Wangji and his brother. Wei Ying had convinced Lan Wangji to ask Xichen to invite Nie Huaisang. He'd insisted that, were he really getting married, he'd need Nie Huaisang there to help plan. "For verisimilitude, Lan Zhan," he'd said. Lan Wangji had reluctantly agreed, and carefully watched Xichen when he had made the request. Xichen had not flinched but there was a flicker in his eyes when he'd said, "Of course."

"Trust me." Nie Huaisang has an eyebrow raised high as he nudges at a seating token with his pinky. "You don't want to risk it. Which wine are you serving?" He looks at Lan Wangji with his eyebrows up, his face curious, like he expects Lan Wangji to actually have an answer to his query.

Lan Wangji just stares at him.

Nie Huaisang's face falls, like Lan Wangji has disappointed him on a deeply personal level. "Wei-xiong? Tell me you have a proprietor. Tell me you have a plan." He shuts his eyes, presses his fan against his lips. "I know you must have a plan."

"I do," Wei Ying says reassuringly. "I do. It's why I asked Zewu-jun to invite you here. We need your help, Nie-xiong. You can *see* that we need your help." He presses his hand to the table in front of himself beseechingly. "I need your help."

Nie Huaisang shakes his head rapidly several times in a row. "I'm sure I don't know how I could possibly help," he says. "There isn't anything that someone else doesn't know a whole lot better than I ever could." He nudges another seating chart token to a new table, shuddering a little as he glances at the names. "That would be a disaster," he murmurs as an aside. "Besides," he says then, fluttering his fan in front of his face, "who am I, to offer any sort of guidance to the Lan Clan?"

"Still," Xichen says, looking uncomfortable. "Any guidance you might be able to give us would be much appreciated." He's watching Nie Huaisang warily, and Lan Wangji wonders if, after all this time, his brother has explored his feelings about Nie Huaisang any further. He knows Xichen's devotion to Nie Mingjue as well as Jin Guangyao, and the knowledge of what Nie Huaisang had set in motion against Jin Guangyao resulted in endless months of despair throughout Xichen's seclusion. But he also knows that Xichen had made promises to Nie Mingjue, to look after and assist his brother as much as he was able. It's resulted in an uneven and complicated relationship between Xichen and Nie Huaisang, and Lan Wangji appreciates how much effort his brother is making.

"None, I'm sure," Nie Huaisang says glumly, looking very apologetic. "I'm useless with this sort of thing. I never pay enough attention to sect matters. I honestly have no idea what's going on." He turns to Wei Ying, closing his fan abruptly. "You do know Hsin Huang, the proprietor of fine wines in Caiyi Town?"

Somehow, there's been an agreement brokered that there could be wine at the wedding. Uncle had drawn the line at liquor, but when the dowry negotiations were concluded and the wedding date and location decided, somehow Jiang Wayin had walked away with this concession. In writing. He'd looked smugly proud as he'd told them.

"If you go with anyone else, I will absolutely lose all faith in your ability to continue to survive as a human being," Nie Huaisang says now. "Tell them I sent you. They'll give you a deal. I have no idea why—some family history there, I'm sure, that has nothing to do with me. But do it." He taps his fan against the table, his eyes falling to the seating chart again. He leans forward, gathers up a half-dozen tokens, and redistributes them with alacrity. "His sister runs the best pastry shop within twenty li," he says distractedly. "That's where you should go for the desserts."

Wei Ying is beaming at Nie Huaisang. "You're the best one, Nie-xiong. Zewu-jun, thank you for bringing him here."

Xichen nods, still eyeing Nie Huaisang uneasily.

Nie Huaisang slumps back in his chair, the corners of his mouth turning down in what looks like actual upset. "You should never listen to me, Wei-xiong. I just run off at the mouth. I know nothing of sect matters, nothing at all."

"Still," Xichen says, only slightly stilted, "we appreciate you being here."

"Tell me you've invited the Feng family," Nie Huaisang says, in the exact same helpless tone of voice he'd insisted he knew nothing of sect matters. "You will cause an *incident* if you have not."

"Invites have not yet been sent," Xichen assures him. "We can add them."

Nie Huaisang waves his hands around. "That's all your thing, I don't know anything about it. You must seat them next to the Zhang clan; that's the only way they'll behave."

Lan Wangji's mind is spinning just watching the whole exchange. Nie Huaisang is someone Lan Wangji has been struggling to understand for years. His brother seems similarly bewildered.

"Come on," Wei Ying says. "Where is this wine proprietor you mentioned? We should at least have a tasting."

Nie Huaisang bounces up from the table. "Correct," he says. "Let's go."

"Xichen?" Lan Wangji asks, rising to his feet. Certainly he cannot allow Wei Ying and Nie Huaisang to visit Caiyi Town unaccompanied. They'd almost certainly wreak some sort of havoc.

"Should any alcohol find its way back to Cloud Recesses," Xichen says, seeming to gather himself from his thoughts. "it would surely be for purposes of a wedding toast." He smiles at Lan Wangji indulgently.

"Correct," Wei Ying says, matching the tone in which Nie Huaisang had said the same word. He's standing next to Nie Huaisang, his arm slung around his shoulders. "Obviously."

Xichen's lips curve up into a smile. "Obviously." He pushes himself to his feet, resting his hand on Lan Wangji's shoulder for a moment. "You go with them, Brother," he says. "It's your wedding, as well." At Lan Wangji's concerned expression, he adds, "Nie Huaisang is a sect leader of one of the finest of all families." He looks at Nie Huaisang, his face serious. "He'll serve admirably as chaperone."

"Oh," Nie Huaisang shoots a look at Xichen, then at Wei Ying, and finally at Lan Wangji before he flicks open his fan again and hides his face behind the flutter of it. "Oh, Lan-zongzhu, I'm sure you shouldn't entrust such a task to someone like me."

"You'll be fine." Xichen escorts them all to the door. "I have much to do here and your name is, as I'm sure you well know, above reproach." He pauses, seeming to be working towards convincing himself of that. Nie Huaisang's eyes go wide over the flutter of his fan.

Lan Wangji is fairly certain that, as he follows Wei Ying and Nie Huaisang out the door, Nie Huaisang is murmuring, "Oh no. Oh no, oh no," under his breath behind his fan.

"Listen," Nie Huaisang says, yet again. From Lan Wangji's count, he's up to four times. "Listen, though," he says again. "Do you mean *married*, married? Or, like. Married?"

Lan Wangji cannot parse any difference between the three times Nie Huaisang has repeated the word *married*.

"Married-married," Wei Ying says after the barest pause, then turns his gaze towards Lan Wangji. He's lying on Lan Wangji's bed with his head hanging off the edge of it, so it's hard to read his expression, but his eyes are definitely twinkling.

Nie Huaisang's look sharpens, even as he hiccups before taking another sip of wine directly from the bottle.

The proprietor had recognized Nie Huaisang the moment they had entered the establishment at Caiyi Town. He had bowed low, while Nie Huaisang had fluttered his fan and said, "No, no, no, it's only me, it's not a big deal at all."

The proprietor had held his bow, obsequiously, a moment longer, then rose, raising his hand in a smooth gesture and inviting them back behind the curtain at the rear of the establishment. Nie Huaisang had gestured Wei Ying and Lan Wangji forward. "It's just because of sect gatherings," he'd murmured, sounding embarrassed in a genuine way. "It's not anything, but they do have the best stock back here and we should just do as he says."

They had emerged some time later with a hefty order placed for delivery in advance of the wedding date, an even heftier discount that Nie Huaisang had somehow procured for them despite Lan Wangji having seen absolutely no bartering going on between him and the proprietor, and several bottles of wine to bring back with them. "For tasting purposes," the proprietor had said smoothly, pressing several into Nie Huaisang's arms. "For the family," he'd said then, handing several more to Wei Ying. "Surely they want to know what the wedding party has chosen ahead of time."

They'd made their way back to Cloud Recesses with the bottles, despite Lan Wangji's raised eyebrow. "No alcohol is permitted at Cloud Recesses," he'd said, keeping his tone even, despite them having just bought a substantial sum of alcohol to be delivered there. Despite the fact that he indulges Wei Ying by harboring liquor for him on a regular basis.

"For tasting purposes!" Nie Huaisang had protested, hugging the bottles to his chest.

"For the family," Wei Ying had said persuasively, giving Lan Wangji his brightest smile.

Lan Wangji had held their gazes for a moment and then swept off in the direction of Cloud Recesses, leaving them to follow.

With their cache of wine.

They had broken into it immediately after dinner. Xichen was in late meetings with Uncle and, with Nie Huaisang still serving as chaperone, Lan Wangji had ordered food from the kitchen to be delivered to the Jingshi.

Now, Wei Ying and Nie Huaisang each have their own bottle of wine and are well on their way towards their second. Conversation has turned, inevitably, to the impending nuptials.

"Married-married," Lan Wangji echoes, studying Wei Ying's upside down features. It seems to be the truth—they haven't yet figured out a way out of it.

Nie Huaisang hiccups again, studying them. "I can't picture it," he declares.

"What?" Wei Ying swings himself up to sitting and scrambles around so his bare feet are tucked under him as he leans forward. Nie Huaisang is seated at Lan Wangji's desk, working

industriously on cracking open and eating peanuts as though he were being paid by the nut. "Why?"

Nie Huaisang looks up at Wei Ying. "Because you're you," he says, blinking at him. "And he's—" He gestures up and down at Lan Wangji. "He's—"

"He is," Wei Ying says. "He really is." He takes another swig out of his bottle, his eyes on Lan Wangji.

Lan Wangji is seated at the table as well, on the side near the bed, so he's at a halfway point between Nie Huaisang and Wei Ying, for the sake of being available to intervene should either of them start to topple over from their wine intake.

"Are you *really*, though?" Nie Huaisang says. "Getting married? I just don't buy it. Have you ever even kissed?"

Lan Wangji bristles at this. Nie Huaisang's tone isn't judgemental or even teasing, but it's still absolutely none of his business.

"Shameless," Lan Wangji murmurs at the same time Wei Ying says, "Yes."

Lan Wangji turns to him, startled.

Wei Ying shrugs, looking slightly abashed. "We have, though," he says softly.

"Mm," Nie Huaisang still looks dubious. "Show me."

There is shameless and then there is *shameless*. Lan Wangji stares at Nie Huaisang.

Nie Huaisang looks back. "If you can't convince me, how do you expect to convince everyone else?"

Lan Wangji keeps his expression neutral. Has Wei Ying confided in Nie Huaisang about the plan? Has he—but no, Wei Ying looks just as startled as Lan Wangji feels.

"We're *betrothed*," Wei Ying says indignantly to Nie Huaisang. "*Officially*. I have a *dowry*. We set a *date*. We told my *brother*."

"Great." Nie Huaisang cracks open another peanut and pops it into his mouth. "Show me."

Lan Wangji gets up. This is preposterous. He's going to leave. But—this is his home. *They* should leave. But they're—clearly, given the turn this evening has taken—drunk. He's standing there by the table, inwardly...seething? Is that the word he'd use for it?

"Wei Ying," he says, indicating that Wei Ying should assess the situation and take his leave.

Wei Ying gets up, pushing himself off the edge of the bed far more easily than he should have been able to, given the amount of wine he has imbibed this evening.

"You don't believe us, Nie-xiong?" Wei Ying asks.

"No, no, I didn't say that." Nie Huaisang fumbles for his fan on the table. "I never said anything like that."

"You did, though," Wei Ying says, sounding indignant again.

Nie Huaisang sighs. "I just said you have to be convincing. Everyone is going to be watching your every move. You can be your usual cold, hard, and handsome self," he gestures with his fan at Lan Wangji, "but people are going to want to see the heat behind everything." He flutters his fan a little. "Otherwise, they're going to think you're doing this just to get out of something."

He appears to clock the look Wei Ying and Lan Wangji shoot each other. "But what do I know?" he says, sounding bored. "You shouldn't listen to me, of all people."

Wei Ying looks at Lan Wangji. "He's right," he says. "We should—I mean, for practice. Obviously we're in love, but—" He fumbles for words a little bit. "But we should—for practice."

Lan Wangji thinks he should put a stop to this. He thinks he should, at least, take a step back. He thinks he should insist that both Wei Ying and Nie Huaisang leave immediately.

But.

"Practice," he says.

"Right." Wei Ying looks determined. "Let's just—hmm, come over here."

It takes Lan Wangji a moment of concentration to make himself move where Wei Ying is guiding him. Which is not, as he'd feared, to the bed, but to sit back down at the table. Wei Ying drops down easily next to him.

They've kissed before. Lan Wangji knows what Wei Ying's mouth feels like. They've kissed suddenly, and they've kissed softly, and they've kissed up against a wall, a memory Lan Wangji keeps chasing as he tries to fall asleep each night.

This feels different. He feels flustered looking at Wei Ying's face, his eyes bright with alcohol. Wei Ying looks nervous, which isn't a look he's seen often on him. His lips pull down at one corner slightly, and he takes a small breath before shifting forward to rest his hands on Lan Wangji's arms. Lan Wangji doesn't startle back but it takes an effort. He's very aware of Nie Huaisang watching them across the table.

"We're getting married," Wei Ying says firmly. "So—" He leans in and he kisses Lan Zhan. It's soft, and his lips are warm, and it's a little bit awkward, since Wei Ying is leaning forward to get to Lan Wangji's lips. Up against the wall had been easier.

Wei Ying pulls away, his eyes still on Lan Wangji. Lan Wangji's face feels very warm, even though that was the barest of kisses.

"That wasn't a betrothed kiss," Nie Huaisang says. "That wasn't even a 'married for so long it's kind of boring' kiss. If you are going to do this, you have to sell it."

Lan Wangji darts a look of annoyance at him. He'd managed to forget Nie Huaisang was there at all for a few moments.

"Ignore him," Wei Ying tells him. "But...okay, he's not wrong. Let's just—hmm." He rearranges how they're sitting, uncrossing his legs and nudging at Lan Wangji to do the same. It's awkward as they shuffle themselves, but when they are settled, their legs are tangled together, and Wei Ying has shifted markedly closer than he'd been before. It feels intimate; it feels like they're exposed. Lan Wangji can feel how hot his cheeks are. He thinks if he looked in a mirror, he'd have two red spots of color burning bright.

"Come here," Wei Ying murmurs, and tilts his head, leaning in. He kisses Lan Wangji and it's—thorough. It's not the hot, wet kissing of the other night but it's nowhere near chaste, either. His mouth is soft and damp and he's kissing Lan Wangji with deliberate intent.

Lan Wangji feels it in his *toes*. He shivers a little, and tilts his head, trying to meet the kiss with the same sort of intent.

It escalates from there. Something about it just slots together; Wei Ying makes a soft noise in his throat, and the kiss gets deeper, and Lan Wangji can't—he's not, he can't—

He pulls back with difficulty. His hand is somehow tangled in Wei Ying's robes, holding him close. He can't bring himself to let it go.

"Better," Nie Huaisang says.

Lan Wangji shuts his eyes for a moment, pressing his lips together. He could very much do without Nie Huaisang bearing witness.

"Still," Nie Huaisang says then. "You have appropriate, courting kissing—the kind everyone gets away with, right?" He nods like he's answering his own question. "Show me that one."

"We did," Wei Ying protests.

Nie Huaisang waggles his fan in exasperation. "That first kiss was terrible. Try again."

Wei Ying blows out a breath and turns back to Lan Wangji, a determined look on his face. There's no hesitation this time as he leans in and puts one hand softly on the side of Lan Wangji's face (Lan Wangji has to work to control the shiver that races down his spine at the touch). Wei Ying kisses him, then, pressing his lips against Lan Wangji's, keeping his mouth closed, but his lips soft, imbued with the promise of *more*.

When he pulls back, slowly, Lan Wangji drifts forward after him without even being aware of it, like he's trying to recapture his lips. He takes a breath and sits back up straight.

"That was good," Nie Huaisang says approvingly. "That was a good courting kiss."

"Well, we've done it before," Wei Ying says, huffing again. "And we are, in fact, courting."

"Okay, then, there's the other kind of courting kiss, where it's definitely not quite chaste." Nie Huaisang flutters his fan in front of his face, his lips turning up in a smile. "You nailed that

one."

"Thank you," Wei Ying says archly.

"What about the *other* kind?" Nie Huaisang asks then.

"What kind?" Wei Ying asks, Lan Wangji is almost scared to hear the answer.

"The kind where you're getting so close to the wedding, and you know you're going to be married so, so soon anyway, and maybe it doesn't matter so much anymore," Nie Huaisang says. "You know, being chaste and good and waiting. When it's that close, maybe you don't have to hold back so much anymore."

"It would not be countenanced," Lan Wangji says. His voice comes out stiff and he feels the way he did when he was a teenager, being laughed at for being a stickler for the rules. But of this much he is certain: what Nie Huaisang is talking about is very far outside the concept of adhering to the letter, not the spirit, of the rules.

"Perhaps not," Nie Huaisang says dismissively. "But it happens anyway. We've all seen it. It's expected—even in Cloud Recesses, Hanguang-jun," he adds before Lan Wangji can say anything. "I promise you that."

"He's right," Wei Ying says. "Not that—not that we'll need to do anything like that, in public."

Lan Wangji bites back the response that doing this in front of Nie Huaisang counts as doing it in public.

"But as it gets closer," Wei Ying says it slowly. He's watching Lan Wangji and his expression is—comforting. In that Lan Wangji knows Wei Ying's face better than nearly anyone else's. And he knows that Wei Ying knows him better than anyone else does, better than anyone else ever has.

Even his own brother has never understood Lan Wangji as fully and completely as Wei Ying does.

"Lan Zhan," Wei Ying says softly. "We can stop. We can. I just think that—he's not wrong, people are watching us very, very closely and—" He stops again, looking at Lan Wangji. Lan Wangji can see what he's thinking: that if they need to break this off, that if it gets too close and the only thing to stop both their potential marriage, as well as any future potential marriages, might be to be caught in some sort of compromising position—then they should be prepared.

"For practice," Lan Wangji says carefully.

Wei Ying's eyes crinkle with relief. "For practice," he affirms.

"Oh, good," Nie Huaisang breathes. "Okay, then." He levels them with a look. "This is the sort of kiss where you are nearly desperate with desire." He says it like he's telling them a

story. "Where you are so close to being married, so close to consummating your ardor, that it's like riding the edge, only all the time."

It should be stranger, more embarrassing, to sit here listening to Nie Huaisang speak of such things. Lan Wangji's ears and cheeks feel hot, but Wei Ying is looking only at him, not at Nie Huaisang. It's easy to get lost in the intensity of Wei Ying's gaze.

"So the kiss needs to show that," Nie Huaisang continues. "It's got to show how close you are to getting lost in it. How you could so easily let that kiss slide into something more, into something you should be waiting for, that you intend to wait for, that you *must* wait for, but for a moment—for just a moment—it's unbearable to think about enduring one minute more without having what you so ardently desire."

"Wow," Wei Ying says quietly, still not looking away from Lan Wangji.

"I've done a lot of reading," Nie Huaisang says dismissively.

"I can tell." Wei Ying is shifting towards to Lan Wangji, even closer than before. Their legs are still tangled together, and Wei Ying's hand lands, warm and heavy, on Lan Wangji's thigh. He's looking at Lan Wangji and his eyes are both heated and nervous, which somehow serves to make Lan Wangji feel a little less unsettled: they're *both* not entirely certain here.

He centers himself, thinking about what Nie Huaisang had said. Thinking about that edge of wanting, about being so close to *having* but not being able to cross that line. Thinking about being close enough to touch, about it being acceptable enough to press chaste, closed-mouthed kisses to your beloved's lips but denied doing anything more. Thinking about everything being so pent-up and wanting and how it would draw you to the very line of what was in any way appropriate because you just needed—you just *needed*—

He's the one who leans in this time, and captures Wei Ying's mouth in a kiss. He doesn't start chaste—he deepens it right away, pushing his hand up into Wei Ying's hair and tilting his head until they slot together just right. Wei Ying makes a small sound against his mouth when Lan Wangji tightens his hold on Wei Ying's hair, and it runs through Lan Wangji's body in a shot of heat. He makes a fist in Wei Ying's hair and holds on and when Wei Ying makes a whimpering sound against his mouth, Lan Wangji slides his tongue inside.

They've kissed like this before. He knows that. But something about the state of mind he's in, of putting himself in that place of yearning—something about how Wei Ying had looked at him, his eyes so hot and so *Wei Ying*—it's so much more than the other kisses they have shared.

He's hot with it, lost in it, and no matter how deep it gets, he finds himself wanting *more*. Wei Ying's hand is still high up on his thigh and his other one is clutching rhythmically at Lan Wangji's shoulder.

It's not enough.

Wei Ying's tongue is in his mouth and he can feel Wei Ying's breath coming hot and fast and it's not enough, it's not nearly enough. He pulls Wei Ying into his lap.

"Oh, fuck," he hears faintly from the direction of Nie Huaisang but then he's lost in the sheer perfection of kissing Wei Ying like this. Like this, Wei Ying's thighs are tight around Lan Wangji's hips and oh, that is causing a surge of heat unlike anything he's ever known to course through every vein in his body. Like this, he can tilt his head back and let Wei Ying take his lips with his own. Wei Ying is pressing his tongue into his mouth again and he's making these small, aching sounds against Lan Wangji's lips and Lan Wangji feels like his blood is aflame.

He brings his hands down to grasp at Wei Ying's hips, the soft fabric of his robes bunching under his hands. He revels in how they feel under his palms, and how easy it is to drag Wei Ying forward from this position, Wei Ying sliding down until he's flush against Lan Wangji. Wei Ying groans against his mouth and Lan Wangji is fairly certain he himself is making some sort of quiet, desperate sound as well, but he can't hear it over the pounding of his own heart.

He releases Wei Ying's mouth, finally, slowing down the kisses, easing back because he has to. He has to. He must. They're not married. They don't intend to follow through on their path to being married. This isn't some step on the way to being married. This is just—

"Wow." It's Nie Huaisang's voice, dimly, behind the background noise of Lan Wangji's heart thundering in his ears. He can't spare the time to even look over at him. Not with Wei Ying's face so close to his. Wei Ying looks dazed, his mouth open, and red, and wet. His hair is mussed and his robes are askew and he's pressed up against Lan Wangji and Lan Wangji can feel how very, very—

"Did you practice *that*?" Nie Huaisang demands. "You must have. If you didn't, well, then, congratulations, because you are *naturals*."

"Naturals," Wei Ying says, sounding slightly stunned. He's still doing better than Lan Wangji—he's not actually sure he could form words right now. "Right. Okay. I—"

"You'll have no problem convincing anybody," Nie Huaisang continues, reaching for his bottle of wine and taking a swift swallow, "that you guys are—" He gestures at them with his fan. "I mean, *obviously*." He flips his fan open, flutters it rapidly in front of his face, his eyes wide and glinting behind it. "I'm overheated and I wasn't even the one being *devoured*."

"I—" Wei Ying keeps blinking down at Lan Wangji, his face flushed, his eyes blown, pure pupil. "I should—right." He maneuvers himself backwards, easing off of Lan Wangji's lap. Lan Wangji, embarrassingly, doesn't let go of his hips right away, so Wei Ying has to do a sort of wriggle to finish his slightly awkward move back off of Lan Wangji's lap.

It leaves Lan Wangji feeling cold, and exposed, and he's not quite sure what to do with his hands now that he's no longer holding on to Wei Ying. He's vaguely aware of Nie Huaisang in the background, but he can't quite bring himself to stop looking at Wei Ying. Wei Ying, who has eased back into his seat beside Lan Wangji but left their legs half-tangled together, touching more than propriety would allow. Wei Ying is looking at him, eyes wide, color high in his cheeks, even as he reaches for his bottle of wine and brings it to his lips. He takes several swift swallows. When he puts the bottle down and draws his wrist over his lips,

wiping away the remains—still looking at Lan Wangji—all Lan Wangji wants to do is lean forward and lick it out of his mouth.

Wei Ying stills, looking at Lan Wangji like he knows exactly what he is thinking about. He looks a bit shaken which again makes Lan Wangji feel better: he's not alone in this.

"Maybe you should practice again," Nie Huaisang suggests, in a casual tone. "Just to be sure you've got it down."

Lan Wangji closes his eyes.

Nie Huaisang is a terrible chaperone.

Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

"We've set this path for ourselves," Wei Ying says glumly, time and again. "Or, well, I did it, when I asked you to marry me."

"I did say yes," Lan Wangji points out. Time and again.

Chapter Notes

Thank you to everyone for all the lovely comments on Part 1! This completes the fic - I hope you enjoy it!

News travels fast when it comes to a sect-arranged marriages, and news of the illustrious Lan Clan agreeing to marry one of the Twin Jades to the Yiling Laozu travels even more swiftly. They have gone further down this road than Lan Wangji had ever anticipated and there is a gathering planned to formally announce their engagement—despite the entire cultivation world being already well aware of it.

"Of course the Fan family is invited as well," Xichen lets them know, reporting the news easily, mixed in among the many other items involved in the planning of the party. "As I'm sure you expected." He flips through the papers in front of him, studying the suggested menu for the event. "Fan Nuying's been engaged this last month to the eldest son of the Lin clan," he mentions, glancing up at Lan Wangji. "I wasn't sure if you had heard."

Lan Wangji inclines his head slightly. He hadn't heard, but he is not surprised. He is, however, relieved that his belief that Fan Nuying would find a respectable match swiftly was justified. And the first son of the Lin clan is a very good match indeed. He's less concerned about seeing her at the party, which leaves room for the several other things he's already concerned about regarding the party.

"It's not that bad," Wei Ying says, surveying the room before them.

Lan Wangji says nothing.

"It could be so much worse."

Lan Wangji still says nothing, but he exhales in a way designed to let Wei Ying know he doesn't disagree with his statement.

"Okay, then." Wei Ying straightens his shoulders, peers out from his table. They're seated at separate tables: Wei Ying with his brother, who has once again traveled in, and Lan Wangji seated at an adjacent table. He's close enough that he can hear Wei Ying above the susurrations of the crowd—Wei Ying's voice carries, as Lan Wangji learned when they were in school together.

Jiang Wanyin appears to pretend he can't hear their exchanges.

"Okay," Wei Ying says again. "We got through the hard part—"

"Did we?" Lan Wangji murmurs. It's worth it for the look of surprised amusement Wei Ying sends him. The party is in full swing, it's true: they're done with the strictly formal part of it, and while the introductions are over—and his uncle's biting, bitter speech had been nearly as excruciating as the endless series of less-than-sincere toasts from each and every sect leader than had come afterward—they are still expected to stay until the end.

"We did." Wei Ying sounds sincere. "No one's even looking at us anymore."

That is largely true. The celebration seems to have subsided into a political arena and while there are many heated and charged conversations taking place, they do not seem to be centered around any part of the impending nuptials. No one has so much as glanced in their direction in nearly an hour. Lan Wangji's back hurts from sitting so stiffly. He's tired. He'd very much like to slip away and go to sleep.

He'd very much like it if he'd be able to bring Wei Ying with him.

Not even for any of the purposes the members of the party would surely assume, should they see them slipping off. He just likes the idea of them stealing away together. Going to the quiet of the Jingshi. Getting out of their formal attire, and Wei Ying sipping slowly from a bottle of liquor as they talk through the ridiculousness of the party, until Lan Wangji falls asleep with Wei Ying's soothing tones filling the soft quiet of the room.

"Hanguang-jun."

Lan Wangji startles slightly at the unexpected formal greeting. He's rising from his seat and bowing to Fan Nuying before he even truly processes who is standing before him.

"Wei Wuxian," she says next, bowing low before quirking an eyebrow, even as she's still holding the perfect posture. "Or, should I have said, Yiling Laozu?"

"Fan-guniang. Wei Wuxian is fine," Wei Ying responds dryly, executing a perfect bow.

"I did wonder," she says.

"Wei Wuxian is, I assure you, fine," he says again, an appropriate smile on his face, no tone at all in his words.

She nods and Lan Wangji finds himself waiting, curiously, to see if she chooses to take offense.

She tilts her head slightly. "The pictures don't quite match up to the reality," she says.

Wei Ying winces, looking both put out and, oddly, delighted. "They do *not*," he says. "Can you believe they get away with that? Do they look anything *at all* like me?"

"They do not." She gives him an assessing look, and then her eyes drift over to Lan Wangji. "I have not yet had the honor of offering my congratulations," she says then. "Even though I knew well ahead of the official announcement." Her expression betrays nothing.

Lan Wangji still feels very tense.

"Thank you, Fan-guniang." Wei Ying says it coolly and calmly. "I have heard that you, too, made an admirable match."

"Mn," she says, glancing over her shoulder to where her betrothed is standing across the room. The first son of the Lin clan is wearing beige robes and staring vacantly into space. Fan Nuying turns back to Wei Ying. "You created the talisman that can detect some spirits before they start causing harm."

"I did," Wei Ying says after a small, startled pause.

"I've used it," she says then. "It's quite a tricky bit of work."

"Yes," Wei Ying says cautiously. Lan Wangji is tense beside him, waiting for this to take a turn towards Fan Nuying politely lambasting Wei Ying for his use of resentful energy.

"It has a little bit of an issue when used against yuan gui," she says then.

"Oh, I *know*." Wei Ying says, leaning towards her. "I did tell people about that at the beginning, but the distribution got away from me before I could imbue it with the proper warnings." He frowns. "I tried six different ways to resolve it, but just couldn't get it going."

"Did you try to redistribute the array?" she says, a thoughtful look on her face. "When I used it, I felt it when the power skewed. It's only slight, but it's there."

"I know, it bugs me every time," Wei Ying grumbles.

"Modulating the distribution might make up for the power skew," she suggests.

"Interesting, interesting." Wei Ying is grinning at her. "I like the idea, but listen to what happened when I tried it..."

Lan Wangji watches them go back and forth as they eventually drift to sit down at Wei Ying's table with Jiang Wanyin, who also gets involved in the conversation. It's a positive outcome, all things considered, and really quite beneficial if this assists in repairing the relations between their clans.

Lan Wangji is curious as to why he is having such a difficult time tamping down his inclination to shove Fan Nuying away from Wei Ying's table as hard as he possibly can.

He doesn't do it, of course. He sits neatly in his own spot, at his own table. He's still very near Wei Ying, who keeps turning to shoot him grins and make comments about what a hard time Fan Nuying is giving him as they take apart the various talismans of Wei Ying's that she has used.

Lan Wangji lifts his teacup and takes a sip before setting it back down in front of him and placing his hands neatly on his knees. He doesn't clench his hands; he keeps his face calm and peaceful. He looks out over the crowd gathered to celebrate his engagement to Wei Ying.

"Lan Zhan, are you hearing this?" Wei Ying sounds delighted.

Lan Wangji tilts his head slightly in acknowledgement. He considers Wei Ying's grinning face. He thinks about what it would be like should he draw him away from the table. If he should interrupt their conversation—there is no way to do it that would not be construed as rude, no matter how politely he approached it. Fan Nuying would *know* what he was doing. He's watched her eyes, her face. She sees everything. She'd know.

He could draw Wei Ying away with a single word. The party has devolved enough that he thinks he could get away with skirting the crowd with Wei Ying close behind him, that he could get any glance to slide off of them as he took Wei Ying somewhere where they could be alone. Not safe, of course, and certainly not wise, but if he was careful, he thinks he could find a disused anteroom into which he could draw Wei Ying.

He'd look at him, then, and Wei Ying would be startled, maybe. Confused, perhaps. Which is actually fairly infuriating, that even now, he'd be confused by this. Lan Wangji lets that hot feeling of frustration build inside him. They'd be close enough that the sounds of the party would still be filtering in around them, close enough that anyone could come in at any moment.

Lan Wangji would not—does not—care. He'd be the one to drag Wei Ying close. He'd do it without hesitation. It's their engagement party. They're to be married in the near future. "You shouldn't," he'd say, "be flirting with girls at our—"

No. Even in this fantasy, he can't imagine saying it right out. Instead, he'd kiss Wei Ying—kiss him hard enough to make him gasp. Drag him close against him and hold him there, kissing him until Wei Ying forgets about Fan Nuying, until Wei Ying forgets his own *name*. He'd have Wei Ying pinned, Lan Wangji's arms wrapped tightly around him. He'd kiss him until he was breathless, then bring his mouth to Wei Ying's neck, and press hot, wet kisses there. He wouldn't hold back from digging his teeth in, from sucking at the skin, until Wei Ying was keening out loud, until Lan Wangji had left a mark that was dark, obvious, bold. It would be impossible to hide it, afterwards. It would be impossible for Wei Ying to go back to the party, looking as he would: disheveled, flushed, *marked*.

There is a shout of laughter from across the room, and Lan Wangji comes back to himself with a start. He rises, then, smoothing down his robes and stepping over to Wei Ying's table.

Wei Ying glances up and at him, breaks off mid-sentence, and bounces to his feet. "Are you going? Are we *allowed* to go?" He looks around at the party, then back at Lan Wangji.

"Mn." Lan Wangji says in response.

"I'll go with you," Wei Ying says then. He glances around for Mingsheng, who pushes himself up from a nearby table and makes his weary way over. "It was nice talking shop with you, Fan-guniang," he says, bowing.

Lan Wangji bows neatly to her as well, and when both he and Wei Ying rise from the bows, he puts his hand on Wei Ying's arm. Wei Ying looks up at him, smiling. Lan Wangji waits for, and is rewarded by, Fan Nuying's look at his hand on Wei Ying's arm, and how she looks back up at his face, assessing. She sits back down neatly, but her eyes have a thoughtful quality to them that makes Lan Wangji quite certain that she has an image in her mind of the two of them together. It's similar to the feeling he had gotten back when they had met to break off the potential engagement, but that time, he'd felt a slight flush of embarrassment. This time, he's fiercely glad to have made his intention known.

"Let's go, Lan Zhan," Wei Ying says, grinning. "We'll make Mingsheng stay up too late making sure we're behaving appropriately."

"Mn," Lan Wangji says again, and coolly leads Wei Ying out of the pavilion.

As the wedding draws inexorably closer, their conversations are consistently focused on how they can get out of it. Every walk has them drawing further ahead of Mingsheng so they can discuss it; every dinner has them leaning close and breaking the rule of silence so they can murmur ideas to each other as though they were sweet nothings, while Mingsheng indulges this rule-breaking.

No solutions are forthcoming.

"We've set this path for ourselves," Wei Ying says glumly, time and again. "Or, well, I did it, when I asked you to marry me."

"I did say yes," Lan Wangji points out. Time and again.

They are consistently close to one another, to be able to talk without being overheard. They get indulgent looks from some of those who notice. They sit close at the table, brushing hands as they whisper escape strategies. They sit beside one another on the steps of the Jingshi, Mingsheng some short distance away. They bend their heads together and Wei Ying's mouth is so near Lan Wangji's that he can nearly taste it. They walk in ever-widening circles along the paths of Cloud Recesses with their shoulders touching.

Lan Wangji is almost ready to give in to Wei Ying's suggestion of a public fight, just to bring this to an end. He did not realize how achingly difficult it would become to have Wei Ying so constantly close. How every brush of his fingers sends sparks across his skin, jotting down what Mingsheng must think are lovers' notes as they sit next to each other at Lan Wangji's

desk, but really are possible plans to change the trajectory upon which they have set themselves. How just that: how the brush of Wei Ying's fingers as he takes the brush to sketch out another idea for breaking away from Lan Wangji, as though he could design it the same way he would a talisman, is enough to make Lan Wangji feel desperate for this to be over, one way or another.

How every time Wei Ying leans in and murmurs in his ear another idea that could lead to them not having to get married, Lan Wangji's blood gets hot, even as he feels himself sinking into a maudlin sort of mood.

They're walking again—another endless winding ramble through Cloud Recesses—and have managed to leave Mingsheng some way behind. To buy additional privacy, they've swerved off the path once more. Wei Ying has Lan Wangji up against a tree in a lovers' pose, his arm propped over Lan Wangji's head, looking down at him as though he were whispering sweet nothings in his ear. But what he's really murmuring is, "Are we playing chicken with your uncle? Is that it? Is he waiting to see who will break first? I don't want to lose, but listen, Lan Zhan: is it better if we break first? Not with the truth, but with something—we'll figure it out. If we break it off, do you think he'll leave you be?"

Wei Ying has asked this question a thousand times over.

"Do you think," Wei Ying says again now, "that things could go back to the way they were? That we could just be—"

The sun is filtering through the trees and it's cold today, even through the thick winter robes they're wearing. The trees are nearly bare and it makes Lan Wangji feel like he is icy, exposed, bereft. He can't have this conversation again. Wei Ying knows what Lan Wangji knows. They both know all too well. Lan Wangji can't do this again. He doesn't *want* to.

He looks at Wei Ying, who is leaning in, his eyes dark and concerned, his posture intimate. "No," Lan Wangji says in response to the question. They can't go back to the way they had been. He closes the space between them and kisses Wei Ying.

Wei Ying makes a startled sound but Lan Wangji puts one hand on his hip, tugging him closer. He kisses him harder, deeper, just as he's wanted, just as he's been thinking about since the night with Nie Huaisang. He kisses him as fiercely and intently as he does in his thoughts every night as he's falling asleep. Wei Ying, after what seems like a moment of quiet surprise, kisses him back nearly as intently.

Lan Wangji doesn't let himself pull back even though he knows that Mingsheng must be drawing near; even though he's more than well aware that kissing like this is far past the line, that it could wreck even the foolish plans they've got in place, the ones that are doing them no good. He knows this. He *knows* this.

Wei Ying is the one who wrenches himself back finally and even then, Lan Wangji has a difficult time letting him go. He finds himself leaning forward, like he wants to get it all started again.

"Or," Wei Ying says, his voice breathless and wrecked. "Or I could just marry you." He takes an uneven breath, uncertain. "What if I just married you, Lan Zhan? No more figuring out how to get out of it, what if I just—"

Lan Wangji is leaning against the tree, his chest full of reckless desperation. "Yes," he says, as Mingsheng rounds the corner.

Wei Ying's eyes go even wider and his lips soften for a moment, before Mingsheng clears his throat from his position back on the path. "Now, now," he says. "Your wedding draws close, but it's not here yet."

"Yes," Lan Wangji says again, still looking at Wei Ying.

Wei Ying's face is startled, unsure, and he's back in his lovers' pose, hovering just near Lan Wangji against the tree. Mingsheng is watching them from the path.

They're not touching at all. Wei Ying's fingers hover near Lan Wangji's face and their bodies are separated by a breath of air. Lan Wangji is looking into Wei Ying's eyes, and waiting.

"Okay," Wei Ying breathes, finally. "Okay, then."

Lan Wangji gives him a nod and pushes off of the tree. Wei Ying takes several stumbling steps backwards and nearly collides with Mingsheng, who has come off of the path to collect them. Wei Ying turns around and looks at Mingsheng. "We're engaged," he says, dazedly.

"Yes," Mingsheng says. "I—yes, I'm aware, but there are still standards of behavior to uphold."

"I know," Wei Ying says, still only half focused. "Standards. Because we're engaged."

"...right," Mingsheng says. "Shall we head back now? It's getting quite chilly."

Lan Wangji and Wei Ying keep pace with Mingsheng on the way back, no longer trying to stride ahead or fall behind.

Sitting here—again, with no privacy, the dining room still half-full after dinner, Mingsheng one table over—Lan Wangji finds himself yearning for a dinner in the Jingshi, with just himself and Wei Ying. Where Wei Ying's chatter is the only noise and the doors are closed against the chill outside and inside is just the two of them in golden candlelight.

He wants it so badly and so suddenly that he has to blink against the emotion that rises up in him.

"Okay," Wei Ying says. He looks...sweaty. "Okay, so listen." he says, and then he stops talking. Lan Wangji thinks—he's almost sure that Wei Ying is looking at his mouth, the same way he had been after Lan Wangji had kissed him, as best he knew how, under the tree that afternoon.

Lan Wangji is not a stupid man. He's known Wei Ying for a very long time. He knows that Wei Ying acts impulsively and will do anything—*anything*—for those he cares about. He knows that Wei Ying cares about him, and he knows that's why he asked Lan Wangji to marry him. (*Twice*, Lan Wangji's brain helpfully supplies him. *He asked you twice.*) Lan Wangji is sorely aware of that fact. He knows that the kissing—practice and otherwise—is a conceit of this plan. He knows he's taking advantage of that.

He plans to stop—he *intends* to stop. He just, somehow, keeps doing it.

"Lan Zhan?" Wei Ying asks it quizzically, keeping his voice down so as to not be overheard. Sizhui and his cohort are still lingering over tea at their table in the corner. There's a quiet buzz of conversation now that the meal is done. The fire is lit in the far wall, bright and cheerful against the early winter dusk falling heavily outside. "Lan Zhan, listen."

Wei Ying leans in and Lan Wangji makes the decision to rest his hand on the table between them. Wei Ying puts his hand on his, as Lan Wangji had known he would. They take to their roles here rather well.

"If we really do this," Wei Ying murmurs. "If we go through with it, that's going to fuck with your future. You won't—there won't be any other marriage allowed. You'll be stuck. I just—" Wei Ying is making steady eye contact with him as he talks, quiet and intense. "If you want out, that is *okay*."

Lan Wangji lets it hold for a beat, feeling how chilly Wei Ying's fingers are over his. Wei Ying's hands are always cold after being outside; it takes him a long time to warm up. "I do not wish for any other marriage," Lan Wangji says finally.

Wei Ying falls silent, his hand still over Lan Wangji's, his face strangely still for a moment. "Okay," he says softly. "Okay, then."

"But you," Lan Wangji says. "You also must take this into consideration. This will affect your future prospects as well. You'll be stuck with it, too." A deliberate echo of Wei Ying's own words.

"Oh," Wei Ying waves him off, his shoulders relaxing for the first time since they'd been in the forest. "I'm the Yiling Laozu. Who's going to marry *me*?"

Lan Wangji stares at him for a handful of moments. Wei Ying is glancing around the dining hall, waving over at Sizhui and Jingyi—both of whom are openly watching them, though at least Sizhui drops his gaze and flushes when Wei Ying waves, while Jingyi merely continues to stare.

Lan Wangji is going to marry Wei Ying. That's who. He contemplates pointing this out to Wei Ying; he contemplates feeling offended by Wei Ying's dismissal. But overall what he is feeling is a wave of both amusement and affection. That statement is...so very Wei Ying.

A group of diners leaves the hall and the noise level drops just as Jingyi says, his tone thoughtful, "You know, I *don't* actually think they were doing it before. Look how much they want to be doing it *now*. They're like that *all the time*." He actually gestures at the table where

Wei Ying and Lan Wangji are seated, and Sizhui seizes his wrist and pins his hand against the table swiftly, his cheeks turning scarlet as he resolutely turns his face away from them.

"*Jingyi*," Sizhui hisses loudly. "Please be quiet. Please. You know they're my—can you not —"

"Okay, sorry." Jingyi, even from this distance, doesn't sound very sorry.

Lan Wangji looks at Wei Ying. Wei Ying's shoulders are shaking with amusement, his mouth trying to maintain a serious expression while trembling with suppressed laughter. His eyes are...so bright. Lan Wangji can't stop looking at him.

"They sit so close, though," Jingyi bursts out in a stage whisper. "Closer than before, even."

Wei Ying meets Lan Wangji's gaze again, his lips quirking.

"And they're always whispering," Jingyi says, over Sizhui's muted protestations. "And sidling off together."

"They're not *sidling*," Sizhui says, the final word coming out much too loud. He flushes harder and glances over at them. "They're allowed to have *some* privacy."

"Not *that* kind of privacy." Jingyi is actively staring at them again.

"Not *any* kind of privacy, apparently." Wei Ying's lips are quirking harder. He's still leaning close—closer, even, like he can't help but bait Jingyi. Lan Wangji has an intense desire to kiss him, right then—kiss those amused lips, lean over the table right there, in front of Mingsheng and the junior disciples and anyone else who may be watching, and just kiss Wei Ying until he makes that small, broken noise in his throat.

Instead, he shifts his hand where it rests against Wei Ying's on the table, tangling their fingers together.

Wei Ying looks up at him.

Lan Wangji watches him over the table and doesn't let go.

It's easier, after that.

The wedding planning is no less detailed and tedious, and they continue to have no privacy. Wei Ying gets a letter from his brother that makes him nearly vibrate out of his skin, and leaves him jittering around for days afterwards, reading key portions of it out loud again and again: from Jiang Wanyin railing against how much Wei Ying is costing him (not for the dowry—the dowry is a point of pride for Jiang Wanyin—but for the travel and the clothes and the wedding outfit for Wei Ying), to how he expects Wei Ying to come back to Lotus Pier for his fitting, to a scribbled set of lines right at the end that Wei Ying can never quite read out loud in its entirety—he gets to his sister's name and has to stop every time, his voice getting tight, his eyes going shiny.

But they're no longer filling every waking hour trying to carve out time to discuss a plan to get out of it. Wei Ying still tries to lose Mingsheng on their walks, but that seems to be more out of habit than anything else. They settle back into a nearly-normal rhythm: both of them in meetings, Wei Ying spending afternoons in his workshop and evenings with Lan Wangji on the steps of the Jingshi with Mingsheng seated an appropriate distance away.

The wedding date is weeks instead of months away when Lan Wangji's uncle tells him to remain after a sect meeting one afternoon. Xichen pauses as well but when Uncle doesn't even glance at him, he gives a bow, looking at Lan Wangji over his clasped hands, and leaves with an apologetic look on his face.

Lan Wangji stands at appropriate attention in the center of the room, as his uncle paces around and takes his spot in the center of the dais. He crosses his arms over his chest and looks at Lan Wangji steadily for a long enough time that most petitioners would grow uncomfortable.

Lan Wangji is not a petitioner. Nor is he uncomfortable. He waits.

"You can end this farce now," his uncle says finally. His voice echoes loudly in the quiet of the pavilion.

Lan Wangji keeps gazing forward.

"Fan Nuying has, as I know you are aware, been betrothed." His uncle presses his lips together for a moment. "You have lost that opportunity for our clan."

Lan Wangji contemplates, not for the first time, how ineffectual his uncle sounds when he spits out his words bitterly like this.

"So," Uncle continues. "It would appear that you have succeeded at that particular endeavor. There is no need to continue this charade." His uncle starts rearranging scrolls on the desk in front of him, like the conversation is complete.

Lan Wangji continues to stand at attention, one hand in a relaxed fist behind his back, sword held gently in the other. He waits.

His uncle glances up at him, as though he were surprised he is still there, when Lan Wangji knows his uncle has been very, very aware of his continued presence.

Uncle draws himself to his full height, staring stonily at Lan Wangji.

"You're determined to keep this going, nephew?" His tone is nearly calm. A farce in and of itself. "For how long? What is your plan? An end will come, one way or the other."

Lan Wangji stands in silence.

"I will make you go through with it." His uncle says it like a warning. He says it like a threat. "You plan to follow this path, I will make you continue to its inevitable conclusion." His lips twist, like he feels like he's made a hit. "Is that what you want?"

Lan Wangji inclines his head. "It is, Uncle."

The sound of his uncle blowing his breath out through his nose is loud in the quiet of the room. "What is this?" he bites out. "What is this disobedience? This—insubordination. Do you not wish to marry a woman badly enough that you'll align yourself and your sect with...*him*?"

The flash of anger Lan Wangji feels at his uncle's words is shocking with how fast and thoroughly it rushes through him. He keeps his face still, but he cannot control what his uncle sees in his eyes.

His uncle's shoulders drop suddenly, like he's tired. "I could find you a match with an appropriate *son* of a sect leader," he says. "That would not be difficult."

Lan Wangji can't stop his gaze from darting up. He did not expect his uncle's anger to crumble this quickly. Or, well, at all. "I am already betrothed," he says steadily, "to the *brother* of a sect leader."

His uncle's lips twist and Lan Wangji braces himself for the vitriol he expects to spill forth, but his uncle levels him with a look. "Is it the physical act of love you're after?"

Lan Wangji's brain stutters to a halt.

"There are allowances for that." Uncle sounds weary.

"Uncle." Lan Wangji desperately wants this line of inquiry to stop. "The dowry has been set." He reverts back to the statement of facts. "The date has been set. The letters have been sent."

His uncle crosses his arms over his chest again. "You're marrying Wei Wuxian."

Again, Lan Wangji expects the words to come out on a wave of vitriol. Instead, his uncle is studying him, like he's trying to figure out what Lan Wangji is playing at. As though Lan Wangji is a mystery to him, which—perhaps he is, at this moment, and for these past several months. Perhaps longer. Perhaps he'd expected Lan Wangji to be the model nephew, the model representative of the Lan clan. Despite his dealings with the Yiling Laozu—Lan Wangji has to work to not let his face alter as he watches his uncle—he is still Chief Cultivator. He is still much sought after, by those sect leaders seeking to make a good match. He is still his mother's son.

He takes care not to raise his chin or allow even a hint of tension slip into his voice. "I am marrying Wei Wuxian," he confirms. He's pleased with how his voice comes out: steady, sure, but not combative. Making sure his uncle is aware this is not a game, or a ploy, or a trap out of which Lan Wangji intends to slip.

His uncle watches him for a moment further. "You are dismissed," he says then, turning to the papers on the desk.

"Uncle." Lan Wangji bows neatly and holds it for the appropriate amount of time before rising and departing.

The wedding is not entirely what Lan Wangji would have expected, had he ever seriously considered getting married. He understands the rituals of course—the bows, the Lan ritual of the hand-fasting, the tea ceremony, all the rest—and those all go largely as expected, even if it is somewhat surreal to have it be happening to *him*. Despite the months of preparation, the machinations as it drew closer, the rituals of the night before and the morning of, he still feels breathless. His heart beats unevenly in his chest as he watches his forehead ribbon get wrapped ceremoniously around their hands. When he gazes down, he can see the hem of his robes—red, silky, unfamiliar—trembling, which is when he realizes that he, himself, is trembling.

When the last ritual is complete and he and Wei Ying turn, he finds he cannot bring the attendees into focus for a long series of moments. He can only feel Wei Ying's hand, soft in his own, and see the sea of endless faces looking at them. After a few moments, he can pick out a few—Sizhui, beaming at them softly, with Jingyi next to him, grinning so widely it's nearly alarming. Jiang Wanyin, sitting stiffly towards the front, his mouth drawn into a grimace even as he wipes at the tears that are dampening his cheeks. From the corner of his eye, Lan Wangji sees Wei Ying give his brother a wave and then a thumbs-up, while Jiang Wanyin takes a shuddering breath, the corners of his mouth softening even as he scowls.

The celebration afterwards is an endless blur. Lan Wangji thinks he'll recall almost none of it.

"So." Nie Huaisang comes up to them, where Wei Ying is murmuring in Lan Wangji's ear about how the Jins are as pompous as they've ever been and Lan Wangji is working to maintain his stoic expression and wondering how much longer there is to go. "So," he says again, rocking back on his heels a little, looking at them archly. "That was some wedding."

Wei Ying grins at him, reaching out and clapping him on the shoulder. "That it was, friend."

"Hmm." Nie Huaisang flicks his fan open, but doesn't flutter it, just watches them over it. "That was a *wedding*," he says. "A real one."

Lan Wangji levels a look at him. "Correct," he says. He does not glance at Wei Ying but he feels Wei Ying's tension beside him. He knows Wei Ying has only ever assured Nie Huaisang that their engagement was nothing less than real. He knows that.

Nie Huaisang's gaze is light, innocent, as he looks steadily back at Lan Wangji. "Of course, of course," he says. "I just couldn't help but notice how very much in love you two are." He flutters his fan for just a moment. "It's very clear."

"Of course." Wei Ying smiles at his old friend. "Why else would we marry?"

"People marry for many reasons," Nie Huaisang says dryly. "It's shocking how few of them have to do with love."

"Well." Wei Ying looks up at Lan Wangji, his look wicked and comforting in equal measure. "That's not us."

"No," Nie Huaisang murmurs, studying them for a moment. "No, that's quite true."

"Quite," Lan Wangji says, looking at Nie Huaisang steadily for a moment before directing his gaze over his head, out at the crowd.

"Hmm." Nie Huaisang fans himself, moving forward to nudge at Wei Ying's shoulder.

"Happy for you, Wei-xiong. Good luck."

The "good luck" sounds significant, like a warning, almost, but when Lan Wangji looks at Nie Huaisang, he just looks more than a little tipsy, all the sharpness fallen away from his gaze. "I need more wine," he says, peering down into his cup for a moment before draining the dregs of it and pivoting to head away. "It's good wine," he calls back over his shoulder. "Good choice, well done."

Wei Ying watches as Nie Huaisang walks away, looking thoughtful as he drains his own glass. "Like he didn't threaten us if we didn't get that particular vintage."

"Mn." Lan Wangji watches Nie Huaisang weave his unsteady way through the crowd. "Your friend has an uneven memory."

"Oh, no," Wei Ying says with certainty. "Trust me, Lan Zhan—he remembers every single thing."

Lan Wangji is starting to realize that.

"I can't believe Lan Qiren let us go through with it." Wei Ying—who wears red with black regularly, so it doesn't make sense that he'd look so markedly different in his red wedding robes but he does, he *does*—has said it several times now.

Lan Wangji would very much like to stop talking about his uncle on his wedding night.

"I thought it would be more romantic." Wei Ying has slipped out of his boots in the doorway and is in the process of undoing his heavy, embroidered top robe as he investigates the chamber they've been given for the night. It seems foolish, since they're in Cloud Recesses and all Lan Wangji has wanted these many months is to have an evening with Wei Ying in the quiet of his own space.

But the post-nuptial chamber is a tradition, and while it's not the Jingshi, it's a relatively understated, yet luxurious room. The decor is sparse, but elegant. There is food laid out for them, under lids covered with warming spells—clearly they are not the first couple to not have gotten to eat more than a bite of food at their own ceremony. The bed is—the clear focus of the room. It's not spartan by any definition of the word. It's—

"Lush," Wei Ying says, having finally wrestled the outer robe off. He lets it, in all its opulence, fall to the floor, and grins broadly when Lan Wangji paces over and picks it up, smoothing it down and laying it with care across a nearby bench.

Wei Ying lets himself fall back on the bed. It's got several soft layers of blankets, as well as an abundance of pillows, and Wei Ying yelps as he's ensconced in the folds of the blankets, several pillows falling over onto him.

Lan Wangji can't stop himself from moving closer, looking down at Wei Ying's face as he emerges, mussed and grinning, from the piles. "*Quite* lush, it seems," Lan Wangji says solemnly.

Wei Ying giggles up at him and Lan Wangji feels a shot of warm, glorious happiness shoot through his veins. It's a feeling he'd expected to have at the wedding proper, but that had felt like a political meeting: too many people; too many eyes on him, on *them*. Even the potent moment of their wrists being tied together with Lan Wangji's ribbon; even the bows they had made: Lan Wangji knew these things were imbued with import and he'd approached them with an appropriate gravity, but he hadn't felt...this.

It had felt like it was something they were getting through. Still...it had felt like something, even during the awkwardness of the ceremony, the toast. It had felt like he and Wei Ying were connected throughout, a golden string holding them together even when the families, the guests, the *politics* of it all swirled between them. Every time Lan Wangji turned around, he'd caught Wei Ying's eye; every time he searched the room for a glimpse of him, Wei Ying had been looking back.

It had been something they'd been getting through, but it had been something they'd been getting through together.

That slight warmth he'd felt in his chest, an easing of the tension every time he'd been able to make eye contact with Wei Ying, is a mere shadow of the heat that is filling Lan Wangji up right now as he looks down at Wei Ying on their bed.

"Who knew," Wei Ying says, struggling to escape the confines of the silken covers and fallen pillows, "that the Lan clan went for such *opulence*?"

"Well," Lan Wangji says. "It is our wedding chamber."

"It's our *wedding chamber*." Wei Ying has made it to the side of the bed, his legs draped over the edge. Even without the embroidered overrobe, he's still in layer upon layer of red. His hair had been immaculately styled in such a way that it had not budged throughout the ceremonies, although Lan Wangji prefers the slightly tousled look he has now. "And look, Lan Zhan." Wei Ying gestures widely and nearly topples over again into the softness of the bed. "It's just us. It's just you and me. It's been months. Years. An *eternity*." He slumps back on his elbows and the way he's beaming up at Lan Wangji feels like a reflection of the warmth that is spreading through Lan Wangji's chest.

This, he thinks, is precisely how he would have expected to feel on his wedding night, had he ever thought he might actually be married.

"Come here," Wei Ying says, drawing Lan Wangji to sit on the edge of the bed. "I haven't really seen you all night. Is that how all weddings work? Is that not allowed?"

Lan Wangji, who has undone his own heavy, embroidered overrobe, sets it neatly aside and allows himself to settle beside Wei Ying. It is, in fact, soft—*lush*—and Wei Ying's face, so close beside him, is flushed and beaming.

"The great Hanguang-jun," Wei Ying breathes teasingly. "Lolling on a *bed*, still dressed, not even *bedtime*." He grins up at Lan Wangji. "Lolling on a bed with your *husband*," he amends. "Did you ever expect that?"

He laughs as he says it, a bit, leaning in like they're both in on the joke, even as he tilts his head, a bit of tension around his mouth.

"No." Lan Wangji holds his gaze for a moment, looking at Wei Ying's eyes in the flicker of candlelight. Wei Ying, so strange to behold in swathes of red silk. "Husband," Lan Wangji says, and kisses Wei Ying.

Wei Ying's breath catches in his throat, like this turn of events is so completely unexpected that he's wildly startled by it. Lan Wangji likes the sound. The bed is too soft to allow for steadiness—it draws them down as Lan Wangji leans closer to Wei Ying, until they're enveloped in the soft blankets, the too-many layers of robes tangled around them.

"Oh," Wei Ying says against Lan Wangji's mouth, still sounding startled, with one knee drawn up against Lan Wangji's hip as the bed shifts underneath them, tilting them closer against each other. Lan Wangji finds he likes the feel of that, Wei Ying's leg against his hip, and he reaches to grasp his other leg, draw it up as well, so that he's caught between Wei Ying's thighs.

He likes the feel of that even more.

"Oh," Wei Ying says again, soft, strangled, breathless. "Oh, I—"

Lan Wangji lets himself sink against Wei Ying, one hand still caught around Wei Ying's thigh, holding Wei Ying close as he kisses him, wrapped in the softness of the bed. He kisses him until Wei Ying's mouth softens under his, kisses him until Wei Ying is making those small noises in his throat that Lan Wangji has been thinking about for weeks, for months. He kisses him until Wei Ying breaks off, panting, his thighs wrapped so tightly around Lan Wangji's hips that Lan Wangji is certain he'll not be able to think of anything else but the feel of them for the rest of his life.

"Oh," Wei Ying says again, still breathless, color high in his cheeks, flustered. "This is—I mean, we don't have to—you don't have to—unless we do? Unless we...should? Is that—do we—" He cuts himself off, struggling to sit up as Lan Wangji draws back, willing himself to be patient. "Oh, just—these robes, Lan Zhan, they are just *everywhere*."

It takes the both of them a bit of time to untangle themselves from one another. Lan Wangji pulls back enough that Wei Ying can kick his legs free of the robes, until Lan Wangji himself can extricate his own enough that he can smooth them down. He doesn't move very far back, though, nor does he make any effort to tamp down the things he is thinking, the things he is feeling. He feels as though he'd made it *embarrassingly* clear in the months of their betrothal—but still, he knows it's been difficult for him to not mask it somewhat.

"The robes are quite voluminous," he agrees, and sets about undoing his next layer of robes. They're complicated, but he's used to complicated robes. He can't get them undone while on the bed, so he levers himself to the side and stands, and starts undoing the lacing, the inner ties, the layer upon layer of slippery silk.

Wei Ying is still on the bed, looking up at him. His mouth is open, wet and red, and his eyes look both curious and a little wary. Lan Wangji would like to dispel the wariness. "We do not have to do this," he says, as he releases another layer and lets it slip off his shoulders and down his arms, so he can lay it neatly across the others on the nearby bench. "We do not have to do anything." He watches as Wei Ying's eyes follow his movements. The last robe is finally removed and he does not hesitate as he undoes the ties on his inner shirt, slipping that off as well so he's left in just the trousers.

Wei Ying has his bottom lip caught in his teeth as he watches Lan Wangji. "I guess," he says, his voice coming out hoarse, "I guess it would—I mean, I guess it's expected that we would ___"

"Mm-hmm," Lan Wangji says, as Wei Ying hesitates. He moves closer to the bed.

"You don't have to." Wei Ying's looking up at him. He's got most of his layers of robes still on. "If you don't want to. But I'd—" He stops, swallows, before he continues. "I'd—if you want to, I'd...want to."

The look he is giving Lan Wangji isn't one Lan Wangji has seen before. Wanting and uncertain and heated. "I want to," he says steadily, and moves towards the bed.

"Oh." Wei Ying is still just *watching* him. "Oh, that's...good. That's...okay, what we're supposed to be doing, right, right." He laughs, a little strangled, and starts tugging at his layers of robes.

"It's what I want to be doing." Lan Wangji pushes Wei Ying's hands aside from where they're ineffectually fumbling at his robes. "With you." He undoes the fastenings of the top layer, reaching along Wei Ying's side to undo the tie there, slipping his hands under the shoulders to ease it off so it pools on the bed underneath him. "If you want to."

"I do," Wei Ying says, still looking up at Lan Wangji. He looks startled, still, but he's working at the ties to his next layer, slipping it off while not looking away. "I do, I just—" He fumbles again. "If I can ever get out of these *robes*. How did you do it so easily? I'm *stuck*, I—" He's huffing out laughter even as he struggles and his hands are getting in the way of Lan Wangji's help. Finally, Lan Wangji pushes him back on the bed and leans in, working through the rest of the layers and fastenings swiftly.

He has one knee resting on the edge of the bed, and while he wants to believe it would be more expedient to simply straddle Wei Ying, he understands that is an idea pushed forward by the steady, strong thrum of desire running through him. He'd not be able to fully get the robes off if he were straddling Wei Ying. It certainly wouldn't work logistically, but of more concern is the fact that Lan Wangji isn't certain he'd have the appropriate focus, were they in such a position.

"Lan Zhan," Wei Ying says, finally, when he's seated in a pool of red silk, bared to the waist, hair tousled, eyes intent. "Are you sure you want—"

"I am sure," Lan Wangji interrupts, mostly because he is, but also to see the gleam in Wei Ying's eye that he gets when Lan Wangji breaks a rule.

"Okay." Wei Ying leans forward, reaching for him. "Come here, then. Since it's our wedding night and all. I guess it's only fair we take advantage of that."

"I intend to," Lan Wangji says, again for Wei Ying's reaction. He's tried every way he knows to make his feelings—and his intentions—clear. What seems to have worked is just *saying* what he wants. Directly. It feels bold, and shameless, but Wei Ying's reactions to it are...gratifying.

At the moment, his eyes fly up to Lan Wangji's, crinkling with delight, and Lan Wangji allows himself to give into yet another impulse and press Wei Ying back against the bed as he crawls on top of him.

"Fuck," Wei Ying says weakly as Lan Wangji settles over him. They are both still wearing the loose, soft trousers, but the skin of Wei Ying's chest is hot and his eyes look a little wild. Lan Wangji feels as though his *own* eyes must be a little wild. He wants Wei Ying. He wants him, and he wants him to *know* that.

"Kiss me," he says, looking down at Wei Ying. "Please. I want you to."

Wei Ying surges up off the bed and kisses him like they've played by the rules this whole time; like they have obeyed the rules as written and exchanged only chaste kisses; like this is their first kiss with heat behind it, with *intent*.

It is perfect, and it is not nearly enough. When Wei Ying presses against him, Lan Wangji wraps his arms around him and lets Wei Ying tumble him backwards against the bed, Wei Ying half on top of him, a good weight, not quite pinning him down.

Lan Wangji shifts until his thigh slides in between Wei Ying's, moving up against him where he's getting hard. The realization of it, and the feel of it against his thigh, is a hot jolt through his whole body. Wei Ying groans deep in his throat, and Lan Wangji revels in it. So far, he's only been able to get Wei Ying to make soft, desperately cut-off sounds. He wants Wei Ying to be *loud*.

"We're really going for it, huh?" Wei Ying pants out, like he's still trying to make a joke of this. Lan Wangji understands it; Wei Ying hasn't yet quite grasped what Lan Wangji is feeling so deep in his heart. "You're—fuck, Lan Zhan, you're so...*fuck*."

Wei Ying is rocking against Lan Wangji's thigh, pressed up against him hot, and hard, so gratifyingly *hard*. Lan Wangji has felt his arousal before, but not like this, nowhere near like this, not even when he had Wei Ying in his lap. This feels feral, almost; necessary, definitely, as they press against each other. Lan Wangji's heart is beating fiercely in his chest and he tilts his head up and looks at Wei Ying.

Wei Ying groans again, at whatever he sees in Lan Wangji's eyes, and surges down against him, kissing him even as they continue to press against each other. It's more than they've ever had and it's nowhere near enough. Hampered by the blankets, Lan Wangji shifts, shoving at them until the majority of them topple off the bed. He doesn't care. Wei Ying watches him, breathing hard. "Fuck, Lan Zhan, look at you, look at you just—"

Lan Wangji waits, for a moment—he wants to hear, he wants to know everything Wei Ying thinks about him—but when Wei Ying just shakes his head, Lan Wangji pushes Wei Ying onto his side and reaches for the laces of his trousers.

"Yeah, I—I think I like this Lan Zhan," Wei Ying says, trying to help, his fumbling fingers getting in the way. "This Lan Zhan is just—going for it, you're just—fuck, *fuck*."

"I'm glad," Lan Wangji says, kissing those last words out of Wei Ying's mouth as he slides Wei Ying's trousers down his hips. He's not done this before—he's not done anything like this before—but he wants it. He wants Wei Ying. He wants Wei Ying to want *him*.

"Fuck." Wei Ying curses again, his voice rough and strangled as Lan Wangji makes quick work of his own trousers and then—before they are even fully off; he meant to remove them entirely, intended to, but once he lets his eyes drop to see Wei Ying, hard, so hard his cock is curving away from his body, he can't stop himself from rolling back on top of him.

The slide of their cocks together has been something he's been thinking about since Wei Ying had slid forward on his lap; since he had pressed himself against Lan Wangji, where he'd been hard, hard from kissing Lan Wangji.

Lan Wangji had wanted to feel that again.

This, though—this is so much more than that. The feel of Wei Ying's skin against his own, like this, hot and smooth—it's making him feel wild. Every time before, they had stopped before it had gotten here. Had stopped before it had even gotten close to here. Every time before, they had *had* to stop and Lan Wangji had been *able* to stop. To rein it in. To draw back and take a meditative breath.

He can't even take a regular breath right now. He can't even pull his mouth away from Wei Ying's, anymore than he can stop himself from sliding up against him, over, and over. He's making noises—he's aware of it, and shocked by them, the sounds he can't stop making.

"Lan Zhan." Wei Ying is trembling under him, his own voice coming out shaken. "Fuck. *Fuck*, keep doing that. What you're doing, it feels—*ah*, ah—it feels—"

He can't seem to finish a sentence, can't seem to stop kissing Lan Wangji the same way Lan Wangji can't seem to stop kissing him, and Lan Wangji is fiercely, ecstatically pleased by that.

"It's so hot," Wei Ying pants. "It's—you're so wet, fuck, I can't—"

Lan Wangji does get wet when he is aroused. He knows this about himself, but he does not believe he's ever been this aroused before in his life. He can feel how easy the slide is

between them, and it feels wanton and inexpressibly erotic that it's because of him, because of how he's dripping against Wei Ying.

He feels, with the part of his brain that's still working, like his very blood is on fire.

Still—he wants more than this. "Wei Ying," he says. He's shocked by how his voice comes out: rough, shaky. Then, feeling bold, "Husband."

"Oh fuck," Wei Ying says faintly. Like he's somehow forgotten. "Oh fuck, that's so weird. Husband. *Husband*." He hesitates a moment, pulling his head back and sweeping his hair out of his eyes, looking up at Lan Wangji. "Do you—is it weird for you? Is this—you know we don't have to—"

As though Lan Wangji has him here, has Wei Ying pinned beneath him as he moves against him, but isn't sure. As though he somehow doesn't want to be doing this. As though right now, here, still Wei Ying thinks—

"I want to." Lan Wangji slides slowly against Wei Ying, watching his face. "I want this." He brings his mouth down to where he can see the pulse jumping on Wei Ying's neck, presses his mouth against it, slips his tongue out like he can feel his heart beating right there. "I want you," he says and then, again, carefully, "Husband."

"Fuck," Wei Ying says emphatically. He still sounds bewildered. "Because we're supposed to?"

"Because I want this." Lan Wangji presses his mouth against Wei Ying's skin harder, until he can, in fact, feel his pulse beating against his lips. He sucks, then, drawing the skin against his lips, his tongue, his teeth. He wants to feel it. He wants to taste it. When he pulls back, there's a mark already blooming on Wei Ying's neck and, with a rush, he realizes he wants that, too: wants Wei Ying marked by him, wants to be able to see it tomorrow morning, a sort of proof.

Wei Ying is panting by the time Lan Wangji lifts his head. "Fuck," he says. "Fuck, that's—that's a lot—you're so fucking—come here, come here." His voice is tight and all Lan Wangji wants is *more*.

"Wei Ying," he says. He wants— "Wei Ying," he says again.

"Yeah," Wei Ying says tightly, his head still thrown back. "I need—do you—can you—"

Lan Wangji would like Wei Ying to finish his thought. He would like to know what exactly Wei Ying needs, what he wants. Wei Ying is good with his words. Lan Wangji is not.

"It's our wedding night," Wei Ying says. "I want to—" He hesitates, his breath coming rough and fast. "Consume this."

A rush of heat, overpowering everything that came before, suffuses Lan Wangji. He'd been thinking it, he'd been wanting it, but to hear Wei Ying *say* it—

"Yes," he says. He knows the basics. He knows the steps. He's never done it, never even really thought, but—

Wei Ying is turning over underneath him. "Like this," he breathes.

Lan Wangji feels a moment of disappointment that Wei Ying is facing away, that he won't get to *see* him, but it's a moment only. Wei Ying, decision made, is in control of the situation. He's curving to look at Lan Wangji over his shoulder. His skin gleams in the lamplight, damp with sweat already. He's lean, and his skin is smooth, and Lan Wangji wants him very, very badly.

"Is there something we can use?" Wei Ying says, then quirks his mouth in a grin. "Though you're nearly wet enough we may not need—"

"There is," Lan Wangji cuts him off, too caught up in this to have more than a moment of embarrassment over how very, very wet he is. He fumbles to retrieve the small bottle from the shelf near the headboard. The wedding chambers provide for all manner of circumstances.

He'd thought, in the startling, heated moments when he allowed himself to imagine this, that the process would be embarrassing; would be, perhaps, mechanical, a means to an end only. He's shocked at how caught up in it he gets, in the slow, slick movements of opening Wei Ying up. It is not mechanical. It is not a means to an end. It is, instead, something powerfully intimate. Wei Ying murmurs throughout, guiding Lan Wangji as to what he likes, gasping as Lan Wangji's fingers sink inside him, dropping his head between his shoulders as he shudders through Lan Wangji getting him slick, getting him pliant, getting him *ready*.

Wei Ying curls himself around to look at Lan Wangji over the curve of his shoulder, his mouth open and wet, his breath coming fast, rocking back against his hand, saying, "Good, good, just—*more*, can you—*more*." He asks for more until he's nearly lost his words; until Lan Wangji is gasping in tandem with him, his cock dripping between his legs every time Wei Ying rocks back onto his fingers. Until Lan Wangji nearly wants to finish it like this, wants to tilt forward and just cling to Wei Ying's hip with one hand while he drives inside him with the other.

But— "Please," Wei Ying pants, struggling a little to push himself up on his hands. "Please, we need to—I need you to—fuck, Lan Zhan, fuck, I need you in me, *please*."

All the breath rushes out of Lan Wangji on a moan and he is suddenly, achingly desperate to be as deep inside Wei Ying as he can possibly get. "Yes," he says, shocked at how ragged his voice comes out.

"Good." Wei Ying is trembling on the bed in front of him, braced on his hands. "Please, I—*oh*."

Lan Wangji has drawn his fingers out and the sound Wei Ying makes is shocked, and desperate.

"You have to," Wei Ying pants, twisting again to look at Lan Wangji over his shoulder, his gaze scorching hot. "I need you to—"

Lan Wangji grasps Wei Ying's hips, the skin there slick with sweat and oil. He drags him closer and he pushes his cock against his entrance and oh, oh, it's heat like he's never felt before, not like this, never like this. He goes slow, as slow as he can with his heart beating wildly as though it could escape from his chest. Slower than Wei Ying would like, apparently, as he curses and gasps and demands more, more.

Lan Wangji gives him more. He slides all the way in, deep; his entire body lights up and he's drawing back out without a conscious thought about it, so he can experience that slide back in again, and again. It's imperative; it's beyond his control; it's shockingly erotic, and he's desperately close to completion after only a few strokes.

He grits his teeth, he focuses his mind, and he keeps fucking Wei Ying. He's so aroused he feels like he could melt from it; he feels like he could come in a moment, but he holds on, he holds back, and he keeps moving. Because with every thrust deep inside, Wei Ying is keening. He's choking on moans and he's talking, he's saying, "Lan Zhan," and "fuck yes" and "harder, I need it—*harder*," and then Lan Wangji can't understand the words anymore, lost as they are in Wei Ying's moans, in the sound of their skin coming together, in the desperate panting for breath that Lan Wangji belatedly realizes is coming from himself.

"Oh fuck," Wei Ying says suddenly, clearly, and then Lan Wangji can see Wei Ying's hands clench in fists against the sheets as he shoves back against Lan Wangji, his face turned to the side so his cheek is pressed against his shoulder. Lan Wangji can see his eyes are squeezed shut, his eyelashes dark against his flushed cheek, his teeth digging into his lip as he shudders hard and then, crying out, tightens around Lan Wangji as he comes, desperate noises wrenching out of him as he shakes through it.

It's beyond Lan Wangji's capacity to endure. He can't stop; he can no longer hold back. He drives into Wei Ying again, and it's both too much and not enough. He bears Wei Ying down to the bed, flat, and with that new angle, fucks into him again, and again, certain with each thrust that he will—he will— He comes with a wracking shudder and he thinks he cries out—he must cry out, he feels like the sound is reverberating in his head; but he can hear nothing over the pounding of his heart, and can feel nothing but the clutching heat of Wei Ying's body around him.

He collapses—slowly, inexorably—onto Wei Ying. He tries not to land with his full weight, tries to ease himself off to the side, but Wei Ying is mumbling against the blankets and reaching back with one hand to tug Lan Wangji closer. Lan Wangji allows himself to settle there, as the sweat cools on his skin, as his brain works to come back from what was truly an astonishingly intense orgasm.

"So." Wei Ying says thickly, his eyes still closed, his body limp and damp under Lan Wangji's. "Husbands."

It's still a jolt to hear Wei Ying say it. Lan Wangji gathers himself to push up—they both make small noises as he slips out—and slides off so he's next to Wei Ying. It feels very important to see his face right now.

"Husbands," he responds.

Wei Ying's eyes crack open and, with what seems to be an enormous effort, he pushes himself up a bit, before collapsing back down immediately. "Well," he says. "We were thorough about it." He blinks at Lan Wangji, who keeps watching him. "I can still feel where your hands were," Wei Ying mumbles. "You held on so tight." He's tracing his fingers over one hip and he's watching Lan Wangji with lidded eyes.

Lan Wangji's breath is still coming fast. He feels blurred, half lost in the remembrance of the clutch of Wei Ying's body, in the rhythm of how they moved together. The room is dimly lit around them but the light from the candles dances and he feels, now, more secure than ever. The two of them, alone together, and married.

Married.

"I'm hungry," he says, for he is, quite suddenly. The tension that had ridden with him all day is gone, and he is famished.

Wei Ying giggles against the sheets for a moment. "Well," he says, pushing himself up to sitting. "We can't have that, can we? Let's go see what they left for us." He pauses for a moment, using a sheet to swipe away the worst of the mess before crawling out of bed, kicking the covers off where they get tangled around one foot. His hair falls, long and messy, down his smooth back, which is still damp with sweat. He's unbothered by his nudity, and stands next to the bed, shaking his hair out in order to tie it back. Lan Wangji watches him: the jut of his narrow hip, the curve of his ass, both catching the lamplight. He's still messy with oil, and sweat, and come, and the mark Lan Wangji had sucked into his neck is a dark smudge, high up and obvious—there will be little chance of hiding it, come morning. Lan Wangji's heart catches in his chest with how much he loves him. How much he loves his husband.

Wei Ying catches his gaze and flushes a little, but grins and tosses his hair instead of reaching for his trousers. "Come on, husband," he says. "Let's eat."

Lan Wangji leaves the bed, regretfully.

It's strange to be able to return to the Jingshi the following day. The guests from the wedding are still there, of course. There is another banquet they must attend mid-day, and Lan Wangji has a meeting that he must take, despite it being the day after his wedding, because the trade delegate he must meet with is well-respected, travels rarely, and his presence at their wedding is meaningful. Lan Wangji must take advantage of it to strengthen ties.

But first, he is allowed to bring Wei Ying home with him.

They'd left the wedding chamber in as much order as possible. Lan Wangji had flushed at the state of the sheets, dampened and stained, while Wei Ying just gave a raised eyebrow and a shrug, saying, "It's got to be expected."

And now they are...home. The morning has been different than he'd anticipated. Wei Ying has been quiet, going through the motions of getting ready to leave, putting on his far more

normal attire of black robes and a plain red ribbon in his neat topknot, all in an abstracted state. He's not teased Lan Wangji about the previous night, or really about anything. He's seemed absorbed in his thoughts.

It has been worrisome.

They had eaten their fill of the food that was left for them the previous evening, and crawled back into bed without bathing. They had both been exhausted and sleep had taken even Wei Ying quickly. Lan Wangji had woken in the middle of the night and rolled over to see Wei Ying's sleeping form, sprawled on the bed and taking up more than his share of space, and was helpless not to roll closer and wake him by kissing him, and kissing him, and kissing him. They'd made love again, half-asleep, lost in it, a hazy, hot experience of rutting against each other, sliding towards an inevitable finish that had taken Lan Wangji so fiercely that the world was lost to him for a long while afterwards. When he'd come back to himself, Wei Ying was still panting against his skin, his face buried in Lan Wangji's neck, his hands still clutching at Lan Wangji's hips.

Lan Wangji had held him close as they fell back asleep, sweat and come cooling between them.

The baths they'd taken the next morning had been truly necessary.

Now, standing together in the Jingshi, it feels odd. Wei Ying drifts into the room. It feels strangely barren without Wei Ying's sleeping pallet. Not that it will be necessary, now that they are wed. Lan Wangji's bed has been replaced with a new one, a marital bed, big enough for two. Lan Wangji looks at Wei Ying. Even after the wedding—even after last night—will Wei Ying not want to—will he want to revert to the way things were? It's what he's said, over and over, but—

"Okay," Wei Ying says. "This is—I mean, I guess we should move my stuff over?" He scratches the back of his head. "Or some of it? Or, I guess—maybe I can keep my quarters and we can just—" He looks at Lan Wangji and looks away. "I don't want you to have to be tripping over all my stuff all the time. I can just—"

"They will pack and bring your belongings over later today," Lan Wangji tells him, studying his face for his reaction. "It's already been arranged. I want your things here. I want you here."

Wei Ying looks at him, startled. "Oh," he says. "Oh, that's—good." Then his eyes widen. "They really shouldn't pack my stuff," he says hurriedly. "Not by themselves. I should—there's stuff in there that could really hurt someone if they don't know what to—"

He heads toward the door, looking alarmed. Lan Wangji makes the decision to set aside his questions about what it is that Wei Ying regularly keeps in his quarters that could "really hurt someone" and paces quickly over to him, intercepting him before he can leave. "One moment," he says, before he tugs Wei Ying close and kisses him thoroughly. It takes several moments. He's breathless by the time he pulls back.

Wei Ying has sagged against him, clearly weak-kneed, staring up at him with blown pupils, his mouth slack. "Oh," he says weakly. "That's...oh."

"I'll see you at the banquet," Lan Wangji says, stepping back once he's sure Wei Ying can stand.

"Right," Wei Ying says absently, staring at Lan Wangji's mouth.

"After you go and pack," Lan Wangji reminds him. "Before someone gets hurt."

That snaps Wei Ying to attention. "Right," he says, shaking his head and turning back towards the door. "Right, I have to—okay."

He heads out to attend to his task, but Lan Wangji sees him peek back over his shoulder to where Lan Wangji is watching him from the doorway of the Jingshi. He looks a little bewildered.

The banquet is long, and dull, and Lan Wangji sits through it placidly and watches Wei Ying. Wei Ying, who spends a portion of the banquet squabbling with his brother, who is seated at the next table; Wei Ying, who talks throughout the meal, and who is the most attractive person Lan Wangji has ever seen.

"Stop it," he hears his husband hiss at Jiang Wanyin, who is staring grimly at the lovebite on Wei Ying's neck. "Stop it, it's fine. I just...slipped."

"Onto Lan Wangji's *mouth*?" Jiang Wanyin whispers loudly, then flushes, his gaze darting around the room. When it catches on Lan Wangji, Lan Wangji lets himself meet it directly. He doesn't change his expression, but he does think about last night and the way Wei Ying's pulse jumped under his lips and the sounds Wei Ying had made as Lan Wangji used his teeth against the soft skin of his neck.

Jiang Wanyin blushes brightly and drops his gaze immediately.

Lan Wangji takes another sip of tea and lets his hand rest on Wei Ying's where he's drumming on the table with his fingers. Wei Ying startles a little, looking over at Lan Wangji, and after a moment, Lan Wangji lets himself think about what he'd like to do to Wei Ying after this, how he'd like to bring him back to the Jingshi in broad daylight, immediately after the banquet; would like to draw him up the path, the guests still milling around, everyone extremely likely to be aware of the general idea of what they're going to be doing together.

Not the exact details, though. Lan Wangji himself isn't certain of the exact details just yet. He only knows he wants to taste more of Wei Ying, would like to see what spots on Wei Ying's body make him draw a ragged breath, and which ones make him cry out the way he did last night.

Wei Ying is still watching him with wide eyes, looking nearly...scandalized. It's a rare look for Wei Ying, and Lan Wangji allows himself a moment of smugness before he calmly reaches over to refill Wei Ying's teacup, holding his sleeve back neatly and not spilling a single drop.

Wei Ying swallows audibly and closes his eyes for a moment.

Lan Wangji is, much to his disappointment, drawn into a meeting immediately after the banquet ends, and however much he wants to bring Wei Ying with him, Wei Ying himself is drawn away—Lan Wangji sees him in the corner with Sizhui and Jingyi, both of them beaming at him. Wei Ying is grinning and he pats Sizhui's face before he turns away.

As Lan Wangji leaves the pavilion with his brother, he watches as Sizhui's eyes go wide and he drops his head, covering his face at whatever Jingyi has just said to him. "What?" Lan Wangji hears, Jingyi loud enough that he can hear him clearly even over the milling crowd. "I'm asking about *logistics* of how it *works*, I—"

Lan Wangji cannot decide if he is relieved or disappointed to not know what logistical question Jingyi is looking for an answer to.

When he emerges from his meeting with the trade delegate, he is thoroughly ready for the business part of the day to be over, and has a greater understanding of the appeal of an immediate honeymoon that removes one from family, friends, and, above all, trade delegates.

He finds Wei Ying lingering outside. Wei Ying doesn't notice him for a moment—he's pacing back and forth, and he's got a faraway look in his eyes as he mutters to himself and absently twirls his flute in his fingers, over and over again. Lan Wangji watches him: the slim line of his body in his robes, a familiar sight made new by Lan Wangji's newfound knowledge. He knows, now, the sharp cut of Wei Ying's hips, the fascinating line of hair drawn from his navel down to his most private of areas, the way his skin tastes, the way his cock looks, the way—

Wei Ying turns again, his robes swirling around him, and spots Lan Wangji. "Lan Zhan!" he says, hurrying over to him. "How was it? What a weird day. That banquet was terrible. I can't believe you had to go into a meeting. Do you have any idea of what a pushy kid Jingyi is? I managed to escape after he congratulated me about the wedding—really intensely—but I was *not* far enough away before he started peppering poor Sizhui with stunningly inappropriate questions. I thought Sizhui's face was going to catch on fire. Do you Lans not have a sex ed program? You really should. You could make it as dull and boring as you want, but if it will save anyone from the future terror of what were *truly intrusive* questions, it will be worth it. Trust me."

Lan Wangji is listening, he is, but he's also deeply and thoroughly overwhelmed by the realization he deeply wants to find out what Wei Ying's cock tastes like. He is aware of the lewd nature of such a thought but he cannot—he truly cannot, he's tried—bring himself to care. He wants to find out. He wants to find out right now.

He starts off in the direction of the Jingshi and Wei Ying pivots again and falls into step beside him. "Don't you have another meeting?" he asks. "Or was that it?"

"No other meeting," Lan Wangji says. His heart is beating faster than the careful pace he's keeping would account for and his mouth is dry. He cannot stop thinking about what he wants to do to Wei Ying. He increases his walking speed slightly.

"Ah, good, good. You can help me. I'm hiding from, well. A few people." Wei Ying starts to count it off on his fingers as he keeps pace with Lan Wangji. "Jingyi is, obviously, at the top of the list. Sizhui is just below him, since I'm pretty sure neither of us want to see each other for a very long time after that particular conversation. And then—oh fuck, hang on, fuck."

He disappears off the path in a flurry of dead leaves and crisp branches, his hair ribbon streaming shocking red behind him amidst the trees. From a near distance, Lan Wangji hears the strident tones of Jiang Wanyin. "Where is he, where the *fuck* is he, I come all this way and —"

Lan Wangji makes the informed decision to follow Wei Ying into the trees.

He finds him quite a way back, ducked behind a tree that has been stripped of its leaves as the season has progressed. Wei Ying grasps Lan Wangji's sleeve as he approaches and drags him behind the tree, dried leaves crunching underfoot.

"Shh, shh, I just don't have it in me right now to talk to Jiang Cheng." Wei Ying is peering back towards the path, his hand still wrapped in Lan Wangji's sleeve. He's holding him close, even as his attention is elsewhere, and Lan Wangji finds that his blood is still running so, so hot. He looks at Wei Ying, his profile tense as he peers at the path, and he touches his shoulder. Even that small touch sends a tumult of heat through him and oh. Oh, it would have been better had they been able to make their way to the Jingshi without interruption.

"I think he passed?" Wei Ying says uncertainly. "We have to stay quiet. Just—another couple of minutes. Just in case." He straightens up, leaning back against the tree, finally bringing his eyes around to look at Lan Wangji. He blows his breath out to get the hair out of his face and Lan Wangji is a lost cause. He presses Wei Ying against the tree and kisses him urgently.

Wei Ying makes a startled sound against his lips and that, too, sets Lan Wangji's blood sparking. He's crushing Wei Ying against the tree and he's kissing him and his hands are on Wei Ying's robes, working to get underneath them even as he presses his hard cock against Wei Ying's hip. He feels like he's on *fire*. It really would have been so much better had they been able to make their way to the Jingshi, but he cannot—*cannot*—wait.

"Fuck," Wei Ying pants as Lan Wangji releases his lips. "Fuck, Lan Zhan, you—we can't do this, not here, we—oh fuck." He sways forward as Lan Wangji wraps his hand around Wei Ying's cock, robes pushed aside just enough. He's only halfway hard, which is good, it's good.

He drops to his knees on the forest floor, and Wei Ying moans, sounding shocked and alarmed in equal measure. "Oh, Lan Zhan, fuck, what are we—we can't—you—"

Lan Wangji wraps one hand around him and takes him in his mouth. He's gratified that the experience of Wei Ying getting hard in his mouth is every bit as fascinating as he'd thought it would be.

Abstractly, he thinks he wants the time to take this slower, to get there gradually, to explore every minute part of Wei Ying, but he can't be slow right now. And, given their circumstances, probably *shouldn't* be.

"Oh. Oh, *oh*." Wei Ying's sounds are muffled, and when Lan Wangji looks up, he sees that Wei Ying has his hand crammed against his mouth, biting back the noises he's making. Lan Wangji is disappointed—he wants to hear every sound, every moan—but it is sensible right now. It will, actually, be interesting to see how well Wei Ying does with keeping silent as Lan Wangji continues. He takes a breath in through his nose and takes Wei Ying in deep. The stuttered cry Wei Ying lets out is still muffled, but clearly desperate. Lan Wangji presses his free hand against the front of his robes where he is painfully, achingly hard. It feels *glorious*. The wanton act he's performing, the sharp smell of crushed autumn leaves around them, Wei Ying's desperate sounds in his ears, and the nowhere-near-enough pressure of his hand against himself: it all serves to fan the spark of heat in his blood into a flame.

He believes he's not doing the best he could be, but given that it's his first time, he feels he's doing quite well. He's so aroused that he can't concentrate, can barely find a rhythm, so lost in the silky hard feel of Wei Ying slipping against his tongue, the sharp, salty taste of him as he starts to leak. Oh, Lan Wangji had been correct: the taste of Wei Ying in his mouth is something he's going to desire again and again.

He lifts his hand off his own cock so he can grasp Wei Ying's hip, pin him tightly against the tree as he works to take him in deeper. Wei Ying is trembling, his sounds nearly-noiseless gasps as he makes small, halting thrusts into Lan Wangji's mouth. It's not enough; Lan Wangji wants more. He wants this again, but he wants it where Wei Ying can make every noise possible, as loud as possible. He wants to do it and have Wei Ying fuck his mouth, unrestrained, shove into him again and again as he seeks his release.

"Fuck," Wei Ying gasps. "Oh fuck, Lan Zhan, you can't—you can't, you've got to, I'm going to come, you're going to make me come. I can't, not in your mouth, not in your—oh fuck—*mouth*, I—"

He does. He shakes and nearly doubles over, clutching at Lan Wangji's shoulders as he comes, hot and sharp, in Lan Wangji's mouth. Lan Wangji swallows around him, reveling in the new taste, the sheer shamelessness of this making him shake as though he were the one finding release.

"Lan Zhan." Wei Ying's voice is shaky and he makes a soft sound in his throat as Lan Wangji reluctantly lets him slip out of his mouth. "Oh, Lan Zhan, I can't believe we just did that." He draws his thumb over Lan Wangji's lips and somewhere in the fevered recesses of his brain, Lan Wangji is aware that Wei Ying's hand is trembling. Wei Ying is staring at Lan Wangji with an expression of such longing that all Lan Wangji can do is get to his feet and kiss him.

He wonders if Wei Ying can taste himself on his tongue, and he feels his blood run even hotter. He fears he'll lose his mind if he keeps feeling like this, that he'll just get hotter and hotter until he burns up with how badly he wants Wei Ying.

"Come," he says, fumbling at Wei Ying's robes until, between the two of them, they set him to rights. Lan Wangji himself is barely appropriate, harder than he's ever been in his life, feeling like he could just rut against Wei Ying until he comes, and that it still would not be enough. "Now," he says again, heedless of his appearance, barely able to pass a sparing, grateful thought for the thickness of his robes.

Wei Ying stumbles along beside him as Lan Wangji leads them out of the trees.

No one approaches them as they make their way to the Jingshi. Lan Wangji is not sure he'd have noticed if they had—he's so aroused he can't pay attention to anything but the thrumming of the blood in his veins.

When they get there—*finally*—he does not hesitate as he leads Wei Ying inside. He slides the doors closed and makes himself take a deep, centering breath. Wei Ying is watching him, his mouth slightly open, his eyes a bit wild. "What are we doing?" he asks curiously, as if he doesn't know the answer.

Lan Wangji doesn't respond to the question. "Can you," he says, and has to stop, and swallow, before he can finish the sentence. "Can you set talismans?" he manages finally, moving closer.

"Talismans?" Wei Ying says faintly, watching him even as he fumbles in his sleeve for talisman paper. "For...what?"

"Silencing," Lan Wangji says, working to undo his hairpieces. His heart is beating very fast and his fingers fumble at the familiar task. He could set the talismans himself, but truth be told, Wei Ying's are stronger and, more importantly, he can do it faster than Lan Wangji could.

"Oh." Wei Ying looks down at the papers in his hands and turns swiftly to Lan Wangji's writing desk. He scribbles out several talismans, looks over his shoulder at Lan Wangji, and turns back, quickly adding a few strokes to each page. "Made it a little stronger," he says, as he turns back to Lan Wangji.

"Good," Lan Wangji says.

Wei Ying swallows audibly and shuts his eyes for a moment before he casts them.

"Good," Lan Wangji says again, because he has no further ability to hold back. None at all.

He approaches it methodically, stripping Wei Ying out of his robes at the same time as he maneuvers him to the bed, before removing his own robes. He lets them fall to the floor, heedless of the mess, and climbs on top of Wei Ying.

He opens him up with slick fingers, as swiftly as he can. When Wei Ying is moaning, sweating, and open for him, Lan Wangji slides inside. He's been hard for what feels like hours, but he feels like he could go for a long, long time, so long as he gets to stay deep inside of Wei Ying. They start as they had on their wedding night, with Wei Ying on his hands and knees as Lan Wangji sinks inside him, but after only a few strokes, it's nowhere near enough.

"I want to see you," he says, when Wei Ying whimpers desperately as he pulls out. "Come here, come *here*."

"Oh fuck, Lan Zhan." Wei Ying sounds dazed, looks wild as he struggles onto his back. "Lan Zhan, I want—please, *oh*." He cries out as Lan Wangji sinks back inside him, hitching Wei Ying's legs up, gratified when he groans and easily bends so that his legs are over Lan Wangji's shoulders.

"Husband," Lan Wangji says, as he fucks him into the mattress. Wei Ying moans and squirms underneath him, his hands clutching at Lan Wangji's shoulders, his back, like he's trying to drag him closer when Lan Wangji is as close as it's possible to be. Lan Wangji understands that with every beat of his heart.

"What is—what do you—" Wei Ying gasps, and whimpers, his head thrown back. Sweat slides down the long line of his neck. He's achingly beautiful like this, flushed and flustered, his eyelashes against his cheeks, his mouth open as he gasps, and gasps.

"*Husband*," Lan Wangji says it again, like it's an explanation, his blood thrumming in the rhythm of the word. He drives into Wei Ying, and it's still not enough, even as Wei Ying cries out again, even as Wei Ying's cock presses hard and hot between them.

He wraps his arms around Wei Ying, lifts him while still holding him close, until Wei Ying is in his lap, Lan Wangji still fucking up into him. It's nearly enough, like this, enough that Lan Wangji shakes with it, that he has to bury his face against Wei Ying's skin as he surges up into him.

It's a shock when he comes, one last thrust deep inside sending him spiraling over the edge. He shakes through it, dragging Wei Ying down hard so Lan Wangji stays as deep inside him as he can as he spills into him.

It takes everything in him to ease Wei Ying down when he's finally, finally finished, to lay him on the bed without collapsing on top of him.

Wei Ying's cock is so hard it looks like it must be aching, and all Lan Wangji can think about is that taste in his mouth again, the way it felt when it jerked against his tongue as Wei Ying came. But Wei Ying is too close, whining and begging, and Lan Wangji wraps his hand around his cock and strokes him.

"Ah, fuck." Wei Ying is moving his hips up into the strokes. It's desperately erotic. "Fuck, Lan Zhan, you—please make me—I need to come." He gasps, hard, a rough noise. Lan Wangji wants to hear it. He wants Wei Ying to be *loud*. "I need—I need—"

"Tell me." Lan Wangji didn't know he was going to say it out loud but Wei Ying shudders harder as he does.

"I need to come, I'm going to come, *fuck*, Lan Zhan, all over your fingers, *ah*—" He's clutching at Lan Wangji and clearly holding on by a thread, his cock leaking over Lan Wangji's hand, slicking the way. "All over your pretty clean bed, all over *you*, fuck, I'm—"

Lan Wangji gets to watch Wei Ying's face as he shatters and comes. The cry he gives is loud, gratifyingly loud; loud enough that Lan Wangji is glad about the talismans, glad that he and he alone gets to hear it as Wei Ying shakes apart in his climax. He does spill over Lan

Wangji's fingers, his thighs tense underneath Lan Wangji as he shudders through it. Lan Wangji can't stop looking.

Wei Ying is limp, damp with sweat and his breath still coming in gasps when he's finally done. Lan Wangji lies next to him, half sprawled over him, feeling wrecked and glorious. "I want to see you like this again," he says sleepily, not bothering to lift his head from the bed. "I want to listen to you tell me how you'll fall apart."

Wei Ying's looking at him. He has sweat gathered in the base of his neck, and it gleams in the afternoon sunlight seeping in through the high window by the bed. "Lan Zhan," he says, like a question.

Lan Wangji wants to answer him. His eyes keep closing, despite his best effort. It's still the middle of the day. He should get up.

Wei Ying's hand lands hesitantly on his head, his fingers combing into Lan Wangji's hair after a moment. Lan Wangji didn't think he was holding any tension in his body, but the feel of it sends his muscles to another level of relaxation, and he sinks further against the bed. His arm is over Wei Ying's stomach, his legs tangled with Wei Ying's. They are both sweaty, and sticky, and they should—he should—

He wakes to a yellowy light, late afternoon sun, and it takes him a long moment to recall where he is. He pushes himself up—he'd rearranged himself as he slept, so he's on his back, sheets and blankets tangled around his legs. Wei Ying is asleep beside him, curled up on his side, his face pressed into the pillow. The curve of his hip is visible in the tangled blankets, the skin there golden and smooth, and Lan Wangji wants to touch it, to taste it.

He only looks, however. Wei Ying's hands are curled up against the blankets, one arm flung out towards Lan Wangji. This, he can't stop himself from touching, from slipping his fingers into Wei Ying's hand, gently.

It's enough to make Wei Ying jerk slightly, stirring in his sleep. He makes a small sound and, when Lan Wangji tugs gently on his hand, curls closer, legs shifting under the blankets.

It makes Lan Wangji's heart catch in his throat. He examines that feeling, as he watches Wei Ying slowly slide into wakefulness. He's known that feeling, even before Wei Ying's wild and impetuous proposal. Knowing that feeling was why Lan Wangji had been able to say *yes* to it.

"Hey." Wei Ying's eyes blink open and he yawns, unfocused and still somewhat asleep.

"Hey," he says again, his voice soft and muzzy, "you took a *nap*." He yawns again, scratching at his head, clearly trying to get a better grasp on wakefulness.

"I did." Lan Wangji makes his tone grave and is rewarded by the grin spreading across Wei Ying's face.

"You don't nap." Wei Ying, still on his stomach and caught helplessly in the wreck of sheets and blankets, pushes himself up onto his elbows. "I'm actually pretty sure there's a rule against it."

Wei Ying's hair ribbon is half undone and spilling across his back, tangled in his hair, shocking scarlet against his skin. "There is not." Lan Wangji brings his eyes back to Wei Ying's face, as his eyes narrow and he purses his lips.

"Hmm." Wei Ying tilts his head. "*One must not take rest beyond the appropriate sleeping times.*"

"It says only *appropriate*," Lan Wangji responds. "It doesn't say one *cannot* sleep at other times."

"*Inappropriate* times." Wei Ying pushes himself to sitting. He's still caught up in the blankets, his hair falling messy around his shoulders. The bare skin of his chest draws Lan Wangji's eye

"Lan Zhan," Wei Ying says. The teasing tone is gone. He sounds serious and he's looking around, hunting for his underrobe.

Lan Wangji doesn't want that. He wants them to stay like this, unclothed and wantonly lazy in the middle of the day. He wants—

"What are we doing?" Wei Ying asks it carefully, as he snags his robe from the foot of the bed and shrugs into it. The deep red of the robe makes his skin look even more golden. He's so rumped, even as he takes a breath and looks at Lan Wangji seriously, that Lan Wangji's heart gives another hopeless thump, and it takes everything in his power not to tumble Wei Ying back against the bed.

Wei Ying is looking at him, waiting. Lan Wangji sits up, as well, and smooths his hair back as much as he can. "We got married," he says.

"I'm...aware." Wei Ying's jaw is set stubbornly, and he tilts his head at Lan Wangji. "I'm the one who *asked* you to marry me."

"You did," Lan Wangji agrees. "Twice."

"I asked you to marry me," Wei Ying says, more firmly, "because you were going to be forced into a marriage you did not want and would have been absolutely miserable in."

"Yes." Lan Wangji watches him, waiting.

"And you said yes to me, because you had no other choice." Wei Ying's tone is careful, still.

"I had many other choices," Lan Wangji says. "I could have refused to comply. I could have asked my brother to speak to the family and explain why the match would not work."

"You—we talked about this!" Wei Ying is staring at him, his mouth open. "We *plotted*, Lan Zhan. We *planned*. We hauled Mingsheng around with us endlessly because our plan was *stupid*, but it was all we had!"

"Mn," Lan Wangji says.

"Wait, what the fuck does that mean?" Wei Ying sounds *outraged*.

Lan Wangji's blood runs a little hot, again, and he's thinking about pinning Wei Ying to the bed and fucking that outrage out of him. He blinks, and tries to focus.

"What the fuck does that *mean*, Lan Zhan?" Wei Ying has pushed himself up onto his knees, swearing as he tries to untangle his robe from the blankets. "That plan *was* all we had. We *talked* about this!"

"It changed," Lan Wangji says firmly.

"What? When? How?" Wei Ying is kneeling up next to him on the bed. He looks furious. Lan Wangji loves him.

"You asked me to marry you," Lan Wangji says. "I would not have said yes if I had not meant it." He tilts his head and gives Wei Ying a long look. "I do not agree to do things I do not wish to do."

"Yeah, I fucking know that about you," Wei Ying bites out. "But you—I—wait." He sags back, heels pressing into the mattress. His robes are still askew and loosely tied and Lan Wangji can see the soft skin of Wei Ying's inner thigh through a gap. It occurs to him that he does not yet know what Wei Ying's thighs taste like.

"Hey," Wei Ying says, sounding less furious now, more...bewildered. "Focus up. I need answers."

"I married you," Lan Wangji says, forcing himself to stop studying Wei Ying's thighs, "because you asked me to, and I wanted to." He looks at Wei Ying. "I wanted to be here, alone with you, again. I wanted to talk to you, to have you here, to be with you."

"Well, I wanted that *too*, but—" Wei Ying's face is an endless sea of confusion.

Lan Wangji is going to complete this confession if only so they can get to the part where he kisses the confusion off of Wei Ying's face.

"I wanted—when you kissed me," Lan Wangji says, fumbling just a bit. "When you kissed me under the tree, I wanted—"

"That was part of the plan," Wei Ying says dazedly. "We had to—it was to convince—"

"It was convincing," Lan Wangji says.

"It—what?" Wei Ying is still sitting back on his heels.

"Wei Ying," Lan Wangji says. "Did you want to marry me?"

"Yes, of course, I—" He shakes his head. "Of course I did."

"When you kissed me," Lan Wangji says, trying to line up the words. "It felt like...you wanted to kiss me. That the kissing was...good." *Good* is nowhere close to describing what

kissing Wei Ying feels like, but then again, he's not sure there are actually words for what it *is* like.

"I did," Wei Ying says, still sounding confused. "I do, I—" He presses his lips together.

"And," Lan Wangji shifts closer. "What we've been doing, here, and last night." He has to swallow before he can continue. "You want—"

"You know I do!" Wei Ying says it furiously, poking at Lan Wangji's shoulder. "You know exactly what you do to me, you *saw* me, you took me *apart*, I—"

"Husband," Lan Wangji says. The word resonates in his heart and he can't think of a way to explain that Wei Ying will understand except—

"It was for the *plan*," Wei Ying says, but not fiercely anymore. He says it slowly, studying Lan Wangji and oh, he's getting there, he's close.

"A good plan," Lan Wangji says. "A solid one."

"It didn't mean..." Wei Ying trails off, still looking at Lan Wangji.

"Perhaps not at first," Lan Wangji allows, but thinking back, now, he's not so sure. "Perhaps," he says, thoughtfully.

"Perhaps." Wei Ying's tone is pensive, as well. "And now?"

Lan Wangji looks at him. Wei Ying's robe is askew and wrinkled, his hair mussed, his cheeks flushed the way they get when he's worked up.

"Oh." Wei Ying says it quietly, his face flushing harder. "I—oh."

Lan Wangji nods.

Wei Ying sits quietly for a moment, just watching Lan Wangji back, before a smile flashes across his face, sudden and brilliant. "Husband," he says then, matching Lan Wangji's tone.

"Yes. Is that acceptable?"

Lan Wangji is nearly ready for it when Wei Ying breathes out, "*Acceptable?*" and then tumbles him back against the bed. "Yes, Lan Zhan, it is what I would call acceptable."

They indulge in kissing for a long, long time. It's punctuated by Wei Ying breathlessly asking questions. "How dare you not clue me in on the new plan?" he demands, clambering on top of Lan Wangji. "Don't you know what a dull, clueless cultivator I am?" He kisses Lan Wangji, then pulls back, straddling him and pointing at him. "You married me," he says, his voice high-pitched with breathless humor and feigned outrage, "without telling me it was *real*, Lan Zhan. What daring. What *daring*."

Wei Ying rolls off of Lan Wangji and over onto his back; Lan Wangji takes advantage of the situation, pinning him down, holding his wrists against the bed. He's over Wei Ying on his

hands and knees, and he pauses, looking down at Wei Ying's flushed, pleased face.

"When did you want to?" Wei Ying asks breathlessly. "Tell me, I didn't know, I didn't see. I wasn't *in on it*. Tell me."

"When did I want to marry you?" Lan Wangji asks, tightening his grip on Wei Ying's wrists. Wei Ying's eyes flutter shut for a moment. "Or when did I want to do this?"

"Oh." Wei Ying's eyes fly open. "I meant the first one, but the second one, please, the second one."

Lan Wangji endeavors to be honest in all things. He thinks about it carefully, as he holds Wei Ying down, as Wei Ying shifts underneath him, whining just a little under his breath but looking up at Lan Wangji with large, dark eyes. "I think," Lan Wangji says, "I think for a very long time." He'd planned to say it calmly, but his voice shakes a little as the words come out and even as he sets his jaw, he can't quite control it. "I think I have been wanting you like this since. Since." Lan Wangji, he reminds himself again, endeavors to be honest in all things, but the words are caught in a golden cage in his chest, and somehow he can't finish the sentence. *A lifetime ago*, is one answer. *Since I first saw you and didn't know what to do with the things you made me feel*, didn't even have the words for what you made me feel is another one. *Since before I lost you, and dreadfully more so since after I found you* is the one that rings the truest, and the one he's finding catches achingly in his chest.

"Oh," Wei Ying says, no longer struggling underneath him, his wrists slack under Lan Wangji's clutching hands. He looks up into Lan Wangji's eyes and takes a deep, stuttered breath. "Oh, fuck, Lan Zhan."

The ache in Lan Wangji's chest eases, because he doesn't *have* to force the words out. Wei Ying knows. He knows.

"Come here," Wei Ying says. His voice is quiet and tender and he draws Lan Wangji down into a kiss, and then another one, bringing him closer and closer until they are wrapped together against the blankets, the long, slow kisses tasting like honey and like love.

"They had to have been doing it all along," Sizhui hears as he paces along the path to the library. "It was shameless. *Shameless*." A hesitation. "But..."

"But now," It's another voice, sounding abstracted, confused. "If they had been all along, why would the Yiling Laozu be so..."

"So very..." the first voice says in agreement.

Sizhui rounds the corner in time to see two mid-level cultivators, here for a meeting, clearly, even though he doesn't recognize them. They're in Jin gold and Sizhui sets his face in a smile, approaching them and bowing, deep and appropriate for guests to Cloud Recesses.

Guests who do not know the precept against gossiping.

They both bow back with widened eyes, clearly recognizing him as the son of the Chief Cultivator.

"Lan Sizhui," he tells them, as a polite reminder. "May I offer you any guidance or refreshment as you continue your stay in our home?"

It is nothing but polite, and he means it. He could guide them to the library, to review the precepts. He could take them to the dining hall and sit them down for a meal in the silence there, where even outsiders know better than to speak while eating. The smile he gives them can be read as nothing but genuine as he awaits their response.

"No, Lan-gongzi, but we offer you our thanks for the hospitality." Their smiles are less than sincere, but Sizhui bows again to them regardless and, when he rises, pauses for perhaps a handful of moments, in case they do, in fact, need something that they'd forgotten.

The Jin on the right, the one who'd used the word "shameless," flushes under his gaze. The Jin on the left, who had made reference to the Yiling Laozu, lifts his chin slightly.

Sizhui gives them another smile and then continues on his way to the library. He dislikes hearing Wei-qianbei spoken of in gossip, but Wei-qianbei himself has waved off Sizhui's concerns time and again. "I have been gossiped about for two lifetimes," he says airily each time. "There's nothing anyone can say about me in gossip that concerns me."

Still. Sizhui doesn't like it.

He enters the library, still thinking about the Jins and the gossip, and perhaps that's why he doesn't immediately notice the quiet sounds coming from back in the stacks. When he rounds the corner, it's to see Wei-qianbei pressing Hanguang-jun firmly against the shelves, tilting his head to look up at him. The look he's giving Hanguang-jun is full of such heat and promise that even from this distance, it makes Sizhui blush. Wei-qianbei reaches to press one hand against Hanguang-jun's cheek, then leans up as though he's going to—

Sizhui wheels around as silently as he can. He can get the next volume of the history of alternative healing concepts tomorrow, he decides. It would be wise to take some time to ruminate on the first one before delving into the second.

End Notes

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